

ESC Insight

The Unofficial Guide To The 2016 Eurovision Song Contest

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Samantha Ross and John Paul Lucas

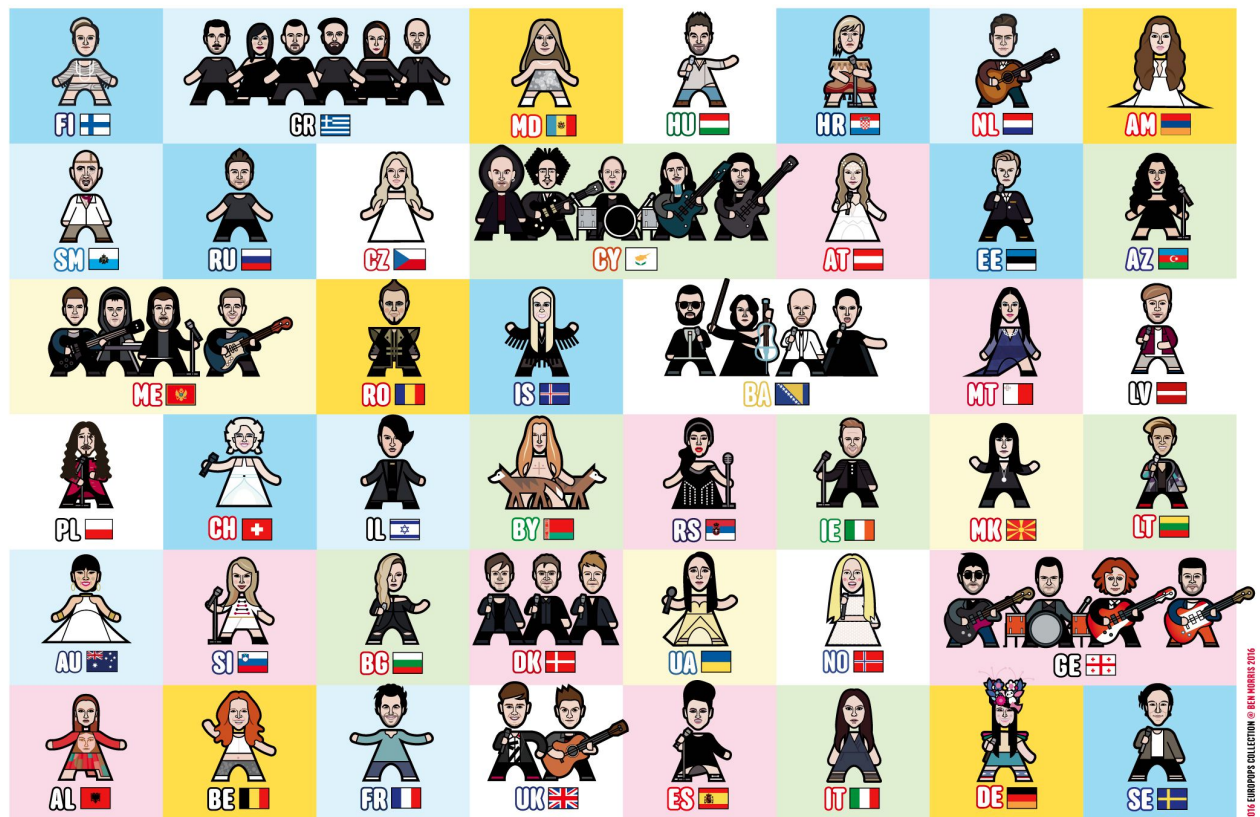


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Editors' Introduction

John's word...

Hej och välkommen till Sverige!

Yes, it's back to Scandinavia for Eurovision Song Contest in 2016, which is bad news for our wallets but great news for the viewers at home as no country throws themselves into the Eurovision experience quite like the Swedes. This year we've got a record-equalling 43 countries, (well, we did), a controversial new voting structure, and the return of Petra Mede to cast our critical eyes on, and we can't wait to get started.

So enjoy this guidebook, and keep supporting ESC Insight - we really couldn't do it without you...

Samantha's word...

Thanks for picking up ESC Insight's 2016 Eurovision Song Contest Guidebook! The theme for this year's event in Stockholm is "Come Together", which (cheeky double entendres aside) truly is the essence of the our beloved Contest. Whether they're artists collaborating on a song, tech crews creating an incredible television event, throngs of fans from all over the world cheering as one in the audience, delegations mingling behind the scenes, or families hanging out on in the living room trying to pick their favorites, Eurovision has the power to unite people.

Wherever you'll be on the night of the shows, I'd like to thank you for reading, listening to, or otherwise supporting ESC Insight. I think I speak on behalf of the entire team when I say how grateful we are that you've decided to Come Together with us!

(Why is everybody laughing?)

Albania

At a Glance

Song: Fairytale Love
Artist: Eneda Tarifa
Composer: Olsa Toqi
Lyricist: Olsa Toqi
Performing: 17th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

34-year-old Tirana native Eneda Tarifa launched her career back in 2002 with the song 'Qëndroj', which was a finalist in that year's Festivali i Këngës. Since then, she's participated in a number of Albanian musical competitions, including Kënga Magjike and Top Fest, which she won in 2010. Eneda has also appeared on television as the host of the comedy and variety show Portokalli. She and her husband, Erjon Zaloshnja, have one daughter, Aria.

Albania in Eurovision

Appearances: 13
Debut: 2004
Victory: -
Best: 5th - 2012: Suus, by Rona Nishliu, with 146 points
Semi Finals: Qualified 2004, 2005, 2008 - 2010, 2012, 2015.

Recent History

2015: I'm Alive, by Elhaida Dani, 17th in the final with 34 points
2014: One Night's Anger, by Hersi Matmuja, 15th in the semi with 22 points
2013: Identitet, by Adrian Lulgjuraj & Bledar Sejko, 15th in the semi with 31 points.
2012: Suus, by Rona Nishliu, 5th with 146 points.

2016 Selection

Starting off the 2016 Eurovision roster both alphabetically and chronologically, Albania's Festivali i Këngës was a three-night affair, starting on Christmas Day and extending through December 27th. Two semifinals of fifteen songs each were narrowed down to a twenty-two song final, where a seven-member jury picked the winner. Fik is one of the few National Finals where there is no input from the viewing public.

There were a few familiar faces in this year's lineup; Luiz Ejlli and Adrian Lulgjuraj, who represented Albania in 2006 and 2013, respectively, were both in the Final, yet failed to make the Top Ten.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Albania's national selection process is far from perfect, but one major advantage they have is that they choose early and have over 3 months to polish their entry to perfection (or, as in the case of last year, just replace it altogether). Eneda Tarifa is a strong vocalist, and the original version of '*Fairytale*' had a sense of drama that could have been teased out into something really special. Sadly, they've dropped the ball completely, smoothing out all of the rough edges and delivering a forgettable, underpowered nothing of an entry. Even in the weaker of the two semis, Eneda is going to have to sell this like her life depended on it to have any chance of sneaking into the finals.

Samantha says...

Few nations take advantage of the period between "song selection" and "song submission" like Albania has. A revamp here, a language switch there, all in the name of taking a National Final winner and turning it into a Eurovision success. Unfortunately, sometimes that renovation can backfire. The original version of '*Fairytale*', '*Përrallë*', was a sweeping, dramatic Bond Ballad that might not have been a winner, but it had something. This year's revamp seems to have deflated the song, and with it, its chances of any major impact on the scoreboard. Eneda's vocals are good, but the lyrics are trite, the arrangement pedestrian, and the passion...gone. It's a shame that RTSH moved away from their tactic from last year, where they gave their Festivali i Këngës winner a new, but similar song. Eneda deserves better.

Your Notes

Armenia

At a Glance

Song: LoveWave
Artist: Iveta Mukuchyan
Composer: Lilith Navasardyan, Levon Navasardyan
Lyricist: Iveta Mukuchyan, Stephanie Crutchfield
Performing: 7th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Born in Yerevan and raised in Hamburg, Iveta Mukuchyan has found success in both nations. She came in 5th place in the show Hay Superstar in 2009, and was mentored by Xavier Naidoo on the second season of The Voice of Germany three years later. She studied jazz vocal performance at Komitas State Conservatory of Yerevan.

Armenia in Eurovision

Appearances: 10
Debut: 2006
Victory: -
Best: 4th - 2008: Qele Qele, by Sirusho, with 199 points
Semi Finals: Qualified 2006 – 2010, 2013 – 2015

Recent History

2015: Face the Shadow, by Genealogy, 16th with 34 points

2014: Not Alone, by Aram Mp3, 4th with 174 points.

2013: Lonely Planet, by Dorians, 18th with 41 points.

2012: - No Appearance

2016 Selection

As has been the case for the past two years, Armenian broadcaster ARMTV decided to hold an entirely internal selection. Iveta Mukuchyan was unveiled as her nation's tenth Eurovision performer on October 13th, with her song, 'LoveWave', released on March 2nd.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

I found it tough to get a handle on this entry the first time I heard it, but after repeat listens I've come to find it utterly beguiling. The spoken word intro, the slightly discordant mix of traditional Armenian and modern electronic musical elements, the atypical hook and Iveta's totally committed performance combine to create one of the most striking entries of the year. It's a lot to ask the TV audience to digest in a single listen, which may hold it back on the leaderboard, but the performance has the potential to be really special, and Armenia are to be applauded for continuing to take bold musical risks in the competition.

Samantha says...

Oooo, Armenia! Lots of modern, slinky, sexy goodness going on in these three minutes. It's got a nontraditional arrangement, a hint of ethnic flair in the usage of local instruments, and a gutsy, fearless female lead. Drawbacks do exist, however: the spoken-word section in the beginning feels like uncharted territory in a contest where comfortable patterns tend to be the norm, and Iveta's English pronunciation feels more than a bit muddled, especially when she reaches for a passionate power-belt. This may be just outside the comfortable Eurovision routine...but that worked pretty well for 4th-placed Aram Mp3!

Your Notes

Australia

At a Glance

Song: Sound of Silence
Artist: Dami Im
Composer: Anthony Egizii, David Musumeci
Lyricist: Anthony Egizii, David Musumeci
Performing: 10th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

South Korean-born Dami Im started her career in music as an independent gospel singer and piano teacher, but rocketed to Australian stardom in 2013 after winning the fifth season of The X Factor, mentored by Dannii Minogue. Since then, she's released two Top Ten albums (and a third to be released just prior to Eurovision) and a handful of successful singles.

Australia in Eurovision

Appearances: 2
Debut: 2015
Victory: -
Best: 5th - 2015: Tonight Again by Guy Sebastian, with 196 points
Semi Finals: Automatic qualifier to the Final.

Recent History

2015: Tonight Again by Guy Sebastian, 5th place with 196 points

2016 National Selection

Following their surprise entry into the 2015 Eurovision Song Contest and subsequent success, Australia's presence at the 2016 Contest was confirmed in November, just prior to their debut at Junior Eurovision. After much speculation, Dami Im was revealed to be Australia's second Eurovision performer at a March 3rd concert by Conchita Wurst at the Sydney Opera House, with her song following a week later.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Australia continue to prove their worth in the competition by sending a totally modern, chart-friendly pop ballad from one of their most popular homegrown stars. If I have one complaint about 'Sound of Silence', it's that the studio version feels just a little bit underpowered. However, Dami Im is a knockout live vocalist, and there's plenty of space here for her to really take it to church - Ruth Lorenzo style - on the night. If she does, this could be a serious contender.

Samantha says...

Say whatever you want about Australia's presence in the competition, but you can't fault them on quality. Dami's already proven herself as both a live and recorded artist, and her song is completely contemporary. It has both vocal and lyrical hooks without feeling too polished and constructed. It's a shame that Portugal's not in it this year, since the emotional themes in this song (distance, desolation, loneliness, and the faintest glimmer of hope) fit the feeling of "saudade" to a T. If she can get those emotions across the camera lens effectively, another Top 5 finish could be in the cards for the Aussies.

Your Notes

Austria

At a Glance

Song: Loin d'Ici
Artist: Zoë
Composer: Zoë and Christof Straub
Lyricist: Zoë and Christof Straub
Performing: 12th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Despite her young age, 19-year-old Zoë Straub has a wealth of experience. At the age of six, she featured on the song '*Dooop Dooop*' by her parents' band Papermoon (who, interestingly enough, were in the Austrian National Final in 2012), and at eleven she appeared on the talent show "Kiddie Contest". In 2015, she had a recurring role on the ORF series *Vorstadtweiber*, and made her first attempt at Eurovision, coming in third place with '*Quel filou*'. She released her appropriately-named first album, *Debut*, that same year.

Austria in Eurovision

Appearances: 49
Debut: 1957
Victory: 2 - 1966, 2014
Best: 1st
- 1966: *Merci Cherie*, by Udo Jurgens, with 31 points
- 2014: *Rise Like a Phoenix*, by Conchita Wurst, with 290 points
Semi Finals: 2011, 2014. Automatically qualified to final in 2004 and 2015,

Recent History

2015: *I Am Yours*, by the Makemakes, 26th with 0 points.
2014: *Rise Like a Phoenix*, by Conchita Wurst, 1st with 290 points
2013: *Shine*, by Natalia Kelly, 14th in the semi with 27 points.
2012: *Woki Mit Deim Popo*, by Trackshittaz, 18th in the semi with 8 points.

2016 Selection

In ORF's *Wer singt für Österreich?*, ten songs went head-to-head for the ticket to Stockholm. Nine of those entries were curated by the broadcaster's Eurovision team, while the tenth was selected via an online wildcard format. In the National Final itself, held on February 12th, the viewing public and a four-member jury (which included Conchita Wurst) picked two songs to proceed to a second round, where the public would decide on the ultimate winner. In the end, Zoë defeated Elly V's '*I'll be Around (Bounce)*' in the superfinal.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Austria emerge from the winner's cycle with one of their best non-Conchita entries of the 21st century. I adore this song, some may find it overly sugary, but I was a big fan of the French pop singer Alizée in the early 00s and this takes me right back to that sound. Zoë's voice hits the perfect note of dreamy innocence to sell it, and the way the song builds is wonderful. That said, it's in an incredibly tough semi final and I think it's in big danger of staying there. Colour me hugely disappointed if so, Austria deserve a chance to redeem themselves after last year.

Samantha says...

Light, fluffy, and more French than the French song itself. Seriously, was this the unused theme music from "Amelie 2: Twee Harder"? It's effortlessly sweet, and Zoë is certainly engaging, but is it just too cutesy? It may be the epitome of the "cotton candy" songs that I've referred to so often...enjoyable, but they dissolve on the palate as soon as you're done consuming the treat at hand. However, I'm not sure how to fix the ephemeral nature of the song's impact without getting rid of the song's charm, which is truly the selling point of 'Loin d'ici'.

Your Notes

Azerbaijan

At a Glance

Song: Miracle
Artist: Samra Rahimli
Composer: Amir Aly, Jakob "Jakke" Erixson, Henrik Wikström
Lyricist: Amir Aly, Jakob "Jakke" Erixson, Henrik Wikström
Performing: 14th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Samra Rahimli first appeared on local TV screens as one of the contestants in 2012's Milli Seçim Turu, Azerbaijan's national selection for Eurovision. Even though she only came in third in her heat, and did not advance in the competition, she was determined to continue with her musical career. Since then, she's appeared as a contestant on O Ses Türkiye (as a member of Team Hadise, and later Team Gökhan Özoguz, both Eurovision alums), as well as a finalist on The Voice of Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan in Eurovision

Appearances: 9
Debut: 2008
Victory: 2011
Best: 1st - 2011: Running Scared, by Ell and Nikki, with 221 points
Semi Finals: Qualified 2008-2015

Recent History

2015: Hour of the Wolf, by Elnur Hüseynov, 12th with 49 points.
2014: Start a Fire by Dilara Kazimova, 22nd with 33 points
2013: Hold Me, by Farid Mammadov, 2nd with 234 points
2012: When the Music Dies, by Sabina Babayeva, 4th with 150 points

2016 Selection

For the second year running Azerbaijan's Eurovision flag bearer was determined via an internal selection. On March 10th, Samra Rahimli was announced as 2016's Azerbaijani performer, with her song, 'Miracle', released shortly thereafter.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

At this point, slightly faceless Scandi-pop is more or less the default setting for Azerbaijan at Eurovision, so I'm not going to keep banging the drum about it. It's not as if they're the only country that have been guilty of it in recent years, anyway. On its own terms, '*Miracle*' is one of the strongest straightforward pop songs of this year's contest. To me it sounds like something Demi Lovato could have had a hit with a couple of years ago - think '*Heart Attack*' and '*Give Your Heart a Break*'. Supremely catchy and well produced, a memorable stage show should put them back in the top ten with this, and if the stars really align I'd even give it an outside chance of slipping past the post as a consensus winner if the juries and televoters fail to agree on one of the more obvious front-runners.

Samantha says...

Every year, I lament the fact that there's almost nothing Azerbaijani about the Azerbaijani entries, despite having one of the most interesting endemic music scenes in the ESC-sphere. (Jazz-mugham, anyone?) This song is perfectly fine, but there's nothing innovative or groundbreaking about it. It's just another polished Scandi-pop number that will probably make it into the Finals. In the song's defense, though, the repeated "Mira-Mira...Miracle" does make for a memorable hook, and Samra can pout with the best heartbroken twenty-somethings. I wouldn't be surprised to see this do well...I just crave something new from a country that I know can bring it.

Your Notes

Belarus

At a Glance

Song: Help You Fly
Artist: Ivan
Composer: Viktor Drobysh
Lyricist: Alexander Ivanov, Timofei Leontiev, Mary Susan Applegate
Performing: 5th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Born in Gomel in 1994, Ivan (stage name of Alexander Ivanov) started his musical studies as a classical guitarist, but his interest in rock music led him to form the group Brown Velvet, which had a handful of hits on the local music scene. Ivan later took part in the Russian edition of Battle of the Choirs, where he first met producer Viktor Drobysh. Their paths would cross again in 2015, when he was a contestant on Glavnaya Stsena, Russia's version of The X Factor. Under Drobysh's guidance, Ivan eventually came in second place. Ivan was also selected to be Russia's representative at the revived Intervision song Contest, but the international competition never materialized.

Belarus in Eurovision

Appearances: 13
Debut: 2004
Victory: -
Best: 6th - 2007: Work Your Magic, by Dmitry Koldun with 145 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2007, 2010, 2013-2014

Recent History

2015: Time, by Uzari & Maimuna, 12th in the semi with 39 points
2014: Cheesecake, by Teo, 16th with 43 points
2013: Solayoh, by Alyona Lanskaya, 16th with 48 points
2012: We Are the Heroes, by Litesound, 16th in the semi with 35 points

2016 Selection

Following an open submission and audition process resulting in over ninety songs being sent to broadcaster BTRC, ten entries proceeded to the National Final, held on January 22nd. Following a 100% televote, Ivan's 'Help You Fly' was narrowly selected over Napoli's 'My Universe'.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

There's a certain style of rock music that appears to be deathlessly popular in the Former Soviet and Balkan regions, and this entry is very much of a piece with it. I appreciate the sense of drama, and at least this entry knows exactly what it is compared to Belarus' tonally confused misfire from last year. That said, I feel it's too run of the mill to do any serious damage. Ivan has already received widespread press coverage for what we'll politely call his ambitious staging ideas. If anything half as memorable comes to fruition he could be a surprise qualifier, but this is more likely to go down as amusing semi final filler.

Samantha says...

I feel like Ivan should be dressed in ripped jeans and flannel, stepping out of a time-traveling phone booth with Keanu Reeves after watching The Scorpions on tour back in 1991.

Your Notes

Belgium

At a Glance

Song: What's the Pressure
Artist: Laura Tesoro
Composer: Sanne Putseys, Louis Favre, and Birsen Uçar
Lyricist: Sanne Putseys, Louis Favre, and Birsen Uçar
Performing: 18th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Flemish teenager Laura Tesoro got a relatively early start in show business, appearing in the crime drama *Witse* at the age of twelve, and appearing in musicals like *Annie* and *Domino* soon after. From 2012 through 2014, she had a recurring role in the soap opera *Familie*. Leaving the show to focus on her music career, Laura auditioned for the third season of *The Voice van Vlaanderen*, eventually coming in second place.

Belgium in Eurovision

Appearances: 58
Debut: 1956
Victory: 1 - 1986
Best: 1st - 1986: J'aime La Vie, by Sandra Kim, with 176 points
Semi Finals: Auto-qualified in 2004, qualified 2010, 2013, 2015.

Recent History

2015: Rhythm Inside, by Loïc Nottet. 4th with 217 points.
2014: Mother, by Axel Hirsoux, 14th in the semi with 28 points.
2013: Love Kills, by Roberto Bellarosa, 12th with 71 points
2012: Would You?, by Iris, 17th in the semi with 16 points

2016 Selection

Headed up by Flemish broadcaster VRT, Eurosong 2016 was a three-show format. Five contestants performed a Eurovision cover on the first show, premiered a simplified version of their potential song for Stockholm on the second night, and sang for the public televote and an international jury on the Final, held on January 17th. The nations represented on the jury were chosen on their previous voting history, taking into account whether a nation has voted for Belgium in the past or not, their tendencies to pick winning songs, or their general performance at the Contest. Laura Tesoro and Tom Frantzis proceeded to the Superfinal, where Laura was named the winner after a second round of televoting.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Oh how this song frustrates me. Belgium have a catchy, of-the-moment pop track and a likeable young talent to perform it. But the two just don't go together. '*What's The Pressure*' demands a gritty, soulful delivery along the lines of Fleur East's '*Sax*' - a song to which it bears a strong resemblance. Laura Tesoro has much more of a pop voice, and as energetic as her performances of this song have been so far, it exposes the weaknesses of her voice rather than playing to her strengths. A total mismatch of song and performer, this squanders a lot of genuinely strong material and could miss out on a finals place as a result.

Samantha says...

Well, the song is undoubtedly fun, and if you can't have fun at Eurovision, where can you? But that being said, I feel like there's a bit of a disconnect. Laura's only 19...is funk/soul/disco the right genre for her? And her voice nearly cracks at points in the song...is she the right singer for the song? Finally, in a Semifinal where her closest competitor, genre-wise, is Bulgaria, I'm sorry to say that Belgium would likely lose that head-to-head match-up. That being said, it's light-years ahead of the last Flemish entrant, the Oedipal Wonderland, '*Mother*', but this feels like a missed opportunity.

Your Notes

Bosnia & Herzegovina

At a Glance

Song: Ljubav je
Artist: Dalal & Deen feat. Ana Rucner & Jala
Composer: Almir Ajanović, Jasmin Fazlić Jala
Lyricist: Almir Ajanović, Jasmin Fazlić Jala
Performing: 17th in Semifinal One

About the Artists

Deen (born Fuad Backović) is no stranger to Eurovision, having given the country a top-ten placement back in 2004 with “In the Disco”. He started his career as a member of the boy-band “Seven Up”, and since going solo in 2000, he’s released three albums since then.

Dalal Midhat-Talakić is best known as one half of the R&B duo Erato, which was active from 1999 through 2009. Since then, she’s been performing all over the region, tending towards soul, gospel, and R&B music.

Ana Rucner, born in Zagreb, Croatia, is an accomplished cellist. Interestingly, her husband, Vlado Kalember, performed “Ciao, Amore” at Eurovision 1984, singing on behalf of a then-united Yugoslavia.

Jasmin “Jala” Fazlić, a Sarajevo-based rap artist, has released three solo albums. He’s also a member of the local hip-hop group BluntBylon and runs the RedEye Vision recording studio and record label.

Bosnia & Herzegovina in Eurovision

Appearances: 19
Debut: 1993
Victory: -
Best: 3rd - 2006: Leijla, by Hari Mata Hari, with 229 points
Semi Finals: Automatic qualification, 2005, 2007, Qualified 2004, 2006, 2008-2012

Recent History

2015: -
2014: -
2013: -
2012: Korake ti Znam, by Maya Sar, 18th with 55 points.

2016 National Selection

Withdrawing from Eurovision after the 2012 contest in Baku, broadcaster BHRT announced their return to the competition in November, unveiling Deen, Dalal, Ana Rucner, and Jala as the nation’s flag bearers. Their song, ‘Ljubav je’, was shared on February 19th.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Bosnia & Herzegovina are back at the competition after a three year break, and at times it feels like this entry represents them making up for lost time by sending three different entries crammed into one three minute package. I love a bit of Balkan drama, so the main part of this song appeals to me, and I have no issue with the rap section either. But the whole thing doesn't quite hang together, and I feel like none of the constituent parts is quite strong enough alone or as a composite. Their 100% qualification record could be in for its toughest challenge here.

Samantha says...

Well, Bosnia's been out of the game since 2012, so they've got three years' worth of songs to catch up on. Might as well put them all in the same song! I have no problem with the idea of blending of genres; it worked well for the Greeks in 2011 with 'Watch My Dance', and gave them a Semifinal victory and a Top Ten overall. But I feel no chemistry between Deen and Dalal, even despite the fact they're singing lyrics like "I've been dying for your body, you make me feel alive". Come on, Bosnia & Herzegovina, you've got a flawless qualification record to uphold!

Your Notes

Bulgaria

At a Glance

Song: If Love Was A Crime
Artist: Poli Genova
Composer: Borislav Milanov, Sebastian Arman, Joacim Bo Persson, Poli Genova
Lyricist: Borislav Milanov, Sebastian Arman, Joacim Bo Persson, Poli Genova
Performing: 12th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Poli Genova is a familiar face to Eurovision fans, having performed for her country in 2011 (with “Na Inat”) and hosting Junior Eurovision this past November. Poli’s career actually started in her youth, when she joined the popular children’s musical group Bon-Bon at the age of nine. Since then, she’s appeared as a vocalist on a number of Bulgarian television shows, including Azis’s Show, The Magnificent Six, and Dancing Stars (the local edition of Strictly Come Dancing). In 2011, after her first Eurovision performance, Poli became a judge on Bulgaria’s version of The X-Factor. She’s also a talented voice actress, doing the Bulgarian-language dubs for Smurfette in The Smurfs and, more recently, as Judy Hopps in Zootopia.

Bulgaria in Eurovision

Appearances: 10
Debut: 2005
Victory: -
Best: 5th - 2007: Voda, by Elitsa Todorova and Stoyan Yankoulov, 157 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2007

Recent History

2015: -

2014: -

2013: Samo Shampioni, by Elitsa Todorova and Stoyan Yankoulov, 12th in the semi with 45 points

2012: Love Unlimited, by Sofi Marinova, 11th in the semi with 45 points

2016 Selection

Returning to the contest for the first time since 2013 and following a successful stint as Junior Eurovision hosts, broadcaster BNT kept their Eurovision plans close to the chest, only announcing the return of Poli Genova on February 19th, and revealing their song ‘If Love Was a Crime’, on March 21st, making them the last nation to reveal their song for 2016.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Now this is how you make a Eurovision comeback! Poli Genova was a standout performer on her last trip to Eurovision for Bulgaria in 2011, but unfortunately she was a lot better than the song she'd been given, and it cost her a place in the finals. This year she has a smart, modern pop anthem that manages to be anthemic and accessible while incorporating an infectious Bulgarian-language hook. One of the strongest entries of this year, at the very least this should have no trouble giving Bulgaria their second trip to the finals.

Samantha says...

After two years bereft of the nation that gave us Elitsa & Stoyan, Sofi Marinova, and Krassimir Avramov, I'm not only thrilled to see the return of the singer that gave me my favorite Bulgarian entry, but also to see her singing an energetic, catchy, and universal song with a great hook. The non-qualification of Poli Genova's 'Na Inat' was one of the injustices of 2011 (in my eyes, at least), so I'm happy to see her return with a song that highlights her personality as well as her voice. Great hook, nice inclusion of local style (in language and instrumentation)...welcome back, BNT!

Your Notes

Croatia

At a Glance

Song: Lighthouse
Artist: Nina Kraljić
Composer: Andreas Grass, Nikola Paryla
Lyricist: Andreas Grass, Nikola Paryla
Performing: 5th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Hailing from the small town of Lipovljani, 23-year-old Nina Kraljić first appeared on the local musical radar after her appearance on the 2009 season of Supertalent, where she ended up in 10th place. She returned to televised musical competition in 2015, when she participated on The Voice – Najljepši glas Hrvatske, and under the guidance of Jacques Houdek, ended up as champion.

Croatia in Eurovision

Appearances: 22
Debut: 1993
Victory: -
Best: 4th - 1996: Sveta Ljubav, by Maja Blagdan, 98 points
1999: Marija Magdalena, by Doris Dragovic, 118 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2004-2005, 2008-2009. Automatically qualified in 2006.

Recent History

2015: -
2014: -
2013: Mižerja, by Klapa s Mora, 13th in the semi with 38 points
2012: Nebo, by Nina Badrić, 12th in the semi with 42 points

2016 Selection

Following their two-year withdrawal, Croatia returns to the competition in 2016. After months of rumors, Nina Kraljić was finally confirmed as the nations' representative on February 24th. 'Lighthouse' was revealed on March 9th, with a full video launched on April 7th.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

It's been a long time since Croatia fielded a genuinely competitive Eurovision entry, but in the beguiling Nina Kraljić they may have found their very own Aminata. A lovely folk-pop confection that makes excellent use of her distinctive vocal style, this is filled with yearning and emotion. I'm excited to see how this looks on stage, because if they can pitch this correctly, it could do very well indeed. If you enjoy this as much as I do, Nina's hit single 'Zaljubljeni Smo Svijet' is also well worth a listen.

Samantha says...

A wispy, folky, ethereal song that oddly sounds just as Irish as it does Croatian, Nina's unique voice is what sells this for me. Normally hearing a singer's accent takes me out of the moment when I'm listening to a song, but it actually works in this case. Even when Nina powers through the key-change, the song doesn't seem to lose its lightness. It's very well-balanced, but it still gets my heart thumping just a touch faster.

Your Notes

Cyprus

At a Glance

Song: Alter Ego
Artist: Minus One
Composer: Minus One, Thomas G:son
Lyricist: Minus One, Thomas G:son
Performing: 11th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Made up of vocalist Francois Micheletto, guitarist Harris Pari, guitarist and vocalist Constantinos Amerikanos, bassist Antonis Loizides, and drummer Christopher Ioannides, Minus One, also known as Marianne's Wish, have been a successful band in Cyprus since 2008, performing both covers and original music. They were last year's third-place finishers in the Cypriot National Final.

Cyprus in Eurovision

Appearances: 34
Debut: 1981
Victory: -
Best: 5th
1982, Mono i agapi by Anna Vissi with 85 points
1997, Mana mou by Hara & Andreas Constantinou with 98 points
2004, Stronger Every Minute by Lisa Andreas with 170 points
Semi Finals: Automatic qualification, 2005, Qualified 2004,2010,2012, 2015,

Recent History

2015: One Thing I Should Have Done, by Giannis Karagiannis, 22nd with 11 points
2014: -
2013: An me thimase by Despina Olympiou, 15th in the semi with 11 points
2012: La La Love by Ivi Adamou, 16th with 65 points

2016 Selection

After their second-place finish in last year's National Final, Minus One were selected by CyBC internally and announced as Cyprus's act for Sweden in early November. Their song and video premiered on February 22nd.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

I've been struggling to put my finger on what's missing in this entry for me, because it's obviously very catchy and energetic. I think it's humour. This is essentially a big old schlager number dressed up in rock clothing, but it's delivered so utterly seriously that I find myself yearning for Mr Lordi to stride onstage and puncture their egos a little bit. Could do well, but I'm beginning to wonder if this might not be one of those entries that tries too hard to be accessible for both a rock and a pop loving audience, and winds up appealing to neither.

Samantha says...

Yes, it's formulaic. Yes, it's another Swedish-co-written song. Yes, it sounds a little bit too much like The Killers' 'Somebody Told Me'. But If you rewind a few years and take a look at Lordi, you realize that they also took a familiar formula, added something different, and ended up with a win. Eurovision fans may tend to lean on similar musical tropes year after year, but 'Alter Ego' provides those familiar tropes with just enough of a twist for viewers at home to think they're on to something edgy. Furthermore, with Greece's shot at the Finals in question with a very divisive song, this might just Hoover up a bit of diaspora in the end.

Your Notes

Czech Republic

At a Glance

Song: I Stand
Artist: Gabriela Gunčíková
Composer: Christian Schneider, Sara Biglert, Aidan O'Connor
Lyricist: Christian Schneider, Sara Biglert, Aidan O'Connor
Performing: 10th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Gabriela Gunčíková, from the Moravian town of Kroměříž, was the runner-up on the second series of Česko Slovenská SuperStar. Following that, she released a pair of albums to local acclaim, and won the 2011 Český slavík award for "Best New Artist". She subsequently moved to California to hone her musical abilities, and in 2014, she joined Trans-Siberian Orchestra as a touring vocalist, performing at about 150 concerts throughout the United States. Gabriela is now pursuing a solo career.

Czech Republic in Eurovision

Appearances: 4
Debut: 2007
Victory : -
Best: 13th in the semi
Hope Never Dies, by Marta Jandová & Václav Noid Bárta, 33 points
Semi Finals: Have yet to qualify from a Semifinal.

Recent History

2015: Hope Never Dies, by Marta Jandová & Václav Noid Bárta, 13th place in the semifinal with 33 points
2014: -
2013: -
2012: -

2016 National Selection

Czech broadcaster ČT decided to continue with their pattern of internal selections, revealing that Gabriela Gunčíková's 'I Stand' was their choice on March 10th. The song and video were released the following day.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

One of those slightly frustrating instances where an exceptional vocal is lumbered with a song that doesn't really do her justice. 'I Stand' is a perfectly creditable effort, but Gabriela deserves better than the flat and basic melody she's working with here. Potentially showy enough to qualify, but Czech Republic should count their lucky stars that Australia are in the other semi final.

Samantha says...

Oh my goodness, are we actually seeing the Czechs take aim at the Finals? A simple, sweeping ballad (but not full of Disney saccharine or cheese) by a gorgeous girl with a fabulous voice and loads of experience performing in arenas singing about confidence and love? This is a tough semifinal, but 'I Stand' is the only true female-led ballad on Tuesday. They may pull off the impossible and be seen on a Saturday night for the first time in their Eurovision history, which would be a victory for them.

Your Notes

Denmark

At a Glance

Song: Soldiers of Love
Artist: Lighthouse X
Composer: Lighthouse X, Sebastian F. Ovens, Daniel Lund Jørgensen, and Katrine Klith Andersen
Lyricist: Lighthouse X, Sebastian F. Ovens, Daniel Lund Jørgensen, and Katrine Klith Andersen
Performing: 13th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Founded in 2014, Lighthouse X (pronounced “Lighthouse Ten”) is made up of Søren Bregendal, Johannes Nymark and Martin Skriver. All three members are highly involved in local charities, and a portion of their revenue goes towards a number of charitable causes in Denmark. They released their first single, ‘Kærligheden kalder’, in 2014, and an EP followed soon after.

Denmark in Eurovision

Appearances: 45
Debut: 1957
Victory: 3
1963: Dansevise by Grethe and Jørgen Ingmann, with 42 points
2000: Fly on the Wings of Love by The Olsen Brothers, with 195 points
2013: Only Teardrops by Emmelie de Forest, with 281 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified 2005, 2006, 2008-2013, automatic qualifier in 2014

Recent History

2015: The Way You Are, by Anti-Social Media, 13th place in the semifinal with 33 points
2014: Cliché Love Song, by Basim, 9th with 74 points
2013: Only Teardrops, by Emmelie de Forest, 1st with 281 points
2012: Should've Known Better, by Soluna Samay, 23rd with 21 points

2016 Selection

Dansk Melodi Grand Prix 2016 took place on February 13th, with ten acts competing for the ticket to Stockholm. In the first round of voting, a split jury and public televote selected three superfinalists. Simone, Anja Nissen (winner of the Australian edition of The Voice), and Lighthouse X then went up against a 100% televote, with the charity-minded boyband taking the win with 44% of the final vote.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Say, isn't it a crock that 'Atemlos durch die Nacht' by Helene Fischer never went to (and won) Eurovision for Germany? The Danes clearly think so, they've essentially sent a wedding band arrangement of it as their own entry this year. Could qualify on sheer exuberance, but there's nothing to see here.

Samantha says...

The Danes seem to have cornered the market on feel-good, easily consumable, but ultimately harmless entries. The only thing more Danish than this song would be the Little Mermaid coming to life, hopping on a bike, riding to Tivoli, and eating a Pølse. They keep serving up vanilla when what I'm really craving is Triple Chocolate Chunky Cookie Caramel Overload. Meh.

Your Notes

Estonia

At a Glance

Song: Play
Artist: Jüri Pootsman
Composer: Fred Krieger, Stig Rästa, Vallo Kikas
Lyricist: Fred Krieger, Stig Rästa, Vallo Kikas
Performing: 13th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Twenty-one year old Jüri Pootsman won the sixth series of Eesti otsib superstaari, and was subsequently signed to Universal Music Baltics. He has released about half a dozen singles onto the local market, but this is first foray into international competition.

Estonia in Eurovision

Appearances: 22
Debut: 1994
Victory: 1
- 2001: Everybody by Tanel Padar Dave Benton & 2XL, with 198 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2009, 2011-2013, and 2015. Did not qualify in 2010 and 2014.

Recent History

2015: Goodbye to Yesterday, by Elina Born & Stig Rästa, 7th place with 106 points
2014: Amazing, by Tanja, 12th in the semi with 36 points
2013: Et Uus Saaks Alguse, by Birgit, 20th with 19 points
2012: Kuula, by Ott Lepland, 6th with 120 points

2016 Selection

For the 8th year, Estonian broadcaster EER has used the popular Eesti Laul format to select their song for Eurovision. After 238 songs were submitted by the public, a jury of music professionals winnowed the songs down to twenty semifinalists. Eurovision alumni on the long-list of entrants included Mick Pedaja, who was a member of Manpower 4 in 2010, and Laura, member of 2005 entrants Suntribe.

Each semifinal (held on February 13th and 20th) saw five songs advance to the Final, held on March 5th at the Saku Suurhall in Tallinn. Following a 50/50 jury/public vote, three songs proceeded to a Superfinal, where the Estonian viewing public would have the complete final say. Jüri Pootsman's "Play" took the win in the end, beating Laura's "Supersonic" and Cartoon feat. Kristel Aaslaid's "Immortality".

This marks the second consecutive Eesti Laul win for songwriter Stig Rästa, who (along with Elina Born) represented Estonia in Vienna with "Goodbye to Yesterday".

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says....

At the risk of making myself persona non grata at the ESC Insight table, I just can't find my way into enjoying this entry. I don't understand what it's trying to say, or how it's supposed to make me feel. There's no story here, no emotional entry point and ultimately nothing to root for. A rare miss for Estonia I fear.

Samantha says...

I love Jüri's deep, smoky voice in this song, and the generally retro Mad-Men-meets-Bond-Theme vibe of the whole package, but the song's satisfying slow burn might not work in a setting where countries have only three minutes to make an impact on viewers at home. The song may want to inspire me to pour a glass of bourbon, but I fear that it may make others want to go off and make a cup of tea.

Your Notes

Finland

At a Glance

Song: Sing it Away
Artist: Sandhja
Composer: Sandhja Kuivalainen, Milos Rosas, Heikki Korhonen, Petri Matara, Markus Savijoki
Lyricist: Sandhja Kuivalainen, Milos Rosas, Heikki Korhonen, Petri Matara, Markus Savijoki
Performing: 1st in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Twenty-five year old Sandhja Kuivalainen (who goes by her first name) released her debut single, 'Hold Me', in late 2013, with her first album, Gold, in March of 2014.

Finland in Eurovision

Appearances: 50
Debut: 1961
Victory: 1 - 2006: Hard Rock Hallelujah by Lordi, with 292 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2006-2011, 2013-2014

Recent History

2015: Aina Mun Pitää, by Pertti Kurikan Nimipäivät, 16th in the semi with 13 points
2014: Something Better, by Softengine, 11th with 72 points
2013: Marry Me, by Krista Siegfriids, 24th with 13 points
2012: När Jag Blundar, by Pernilla, 12th in the semi with 41 points

2016 Selection

Finland's Uuden Musiikin Kilpailu brought together eighteen songs, winnowed down to nine over a series of three semifinals. Televoting was combined with a jury made up of Finnish Parliament members, Eurovision experts, Finnish Swedes, professional musicians, local members for the GLBT community, YouTubers, bloggers, children, and asphalt workers. When all was said and done, Saara Alto's 'No Fear' took the public vote, but Sandja's commanding lead in the jury vote was insurmountable.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

This is... fine, I guess? It's catchy, uplifting, sounds like a song you'd hear on the radio in 2016. A good contest opener, but I'm not sure how many people will remember it after hearing seventeen other songs. In terms of chart pop in the first semi final, I feel like Malta blows Finland out of the water.

Samantha says...

I'm still bitter that Mikael Saari's '*On it Goes*' only came in third in this year's UMK, but '*Sing it Away*' will make for a brilliant show-opener, getting audiences engaged and dancing right off the bat. The song isn't particularly innovative, but it's positive, catchy, and Sandjha is an engaging performer. It reminds me a bit of Laura's '*Addicted to You*' from 2002; an enjoyable fan favorite that ended up overshadowed on the night.

Your Notes

France

At a Glance

Song: J'ai cherché
Artist: Amir
Composer: Amir Haddad, Johan Errami, Nazim Khaled
Lyricist: Amir Haddad, Johan Errami, Nazim Khaled
Performing: Automatic Qualifier for the Final; placement to be determined.

About the Artist

Amir Haddad was born in France, but moved to Israel with his family at the age of eight. In 2006, he took part in the Israeli talent show Kokhav Nolad, but eliminated prior to the finals. After completing his compulsory military service and getting a degree in dentistry, he returned to France to continue pursuing a career in music. He took part in the third series of The Voice: la plus belle voix in 2014, eventually coming in third place. His first full album for the French market will be released just prior to Eurovision.

France in Eurovision

Appearances: 59
Debut: 1956
Victory: 5

- 1958: Dors mon Amour by Andre Cleaveau, with 27 points
- 1960: Tom Pillibi by Jacqueline Boyer, with 32 points
- 1962: Un Premier Amour by Isabelle Aubret, with 26 points
- 1969: Un Jour Un Enfant by Frida Boccara, with 18 points
- 1977: L'oiseau et l'enfant by Marie Myriam, with 136 points

Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Auto-qualify (Big 5)

Recent History

2015: N'oubliez Pas, by Lisa Angell, 25th place with 4 points
2014: Moustache, by Twin Twin, 26th with 2 points
2013: L'enfer Et Moi, by Amandine Bougeois, 23rd with 14 points
2012: Echo (You and I), by Anggun, 22nd with 21 points

2016 Selection

For the second year in a row, French broadcaster France 2 decided to go with an internal selection, with Amir's 'J'ai cherché' unveiled as the entry on February 29th.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

The French so want to do well this year, it'd really hurt my heart to see them propping up the UK at the arse-end of the scoreboard again. There's a lot to like here, not least Amir himself who has not exactly been beaten by the ugly stick. My concern here is that - catchy and accessible as it is - you've kind of heard everything it has to offer within the first 30 seconds. Eurovision songs need to build and sustain interest over their entire running time, and there's a real danger that this is going to end up as one of those beautiful songs that everybody hums and everybody loves - but nobody picks up the phone for.

Samantha says...

Once again, France shows us how willing they are to try new things when previous angles of attack don't hit their targets. Every single year, they send something completely different from the year before. If Twin Twin didn't work, send an emotional chanson. If that didn't work, how about some happy-clappy bilingual pop that's sure to be a crowd-pleaser? Personally, j'adore 'J'ai cherché'. It's uplifting and fun without feeling too trite or fluffy. It's got a great hook and it's difficult to take your eyes off of Amir. I just hope it comes off as well live on a massive stage as it does in studio.

Your Notes

Georgia

At a Glance

Song: Midnight Gold
Artist: Nika Kocharov & the Young Georgian Lolitaz
Composer: Kote Kalandadze
Lyricist: Kote Kalandadze
Performing: 16th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Nika Kocharov & the Young Georgian Lolitaz were founded in 2000. Nika Kocharov is on lead vocals and guitar, Giorgi Marr is on bass, Levan Shanshiashvili is on guitar, and Dima Oganessian is on drums.

Georgia in Eurovision

Appearances: 9
Debut: 2007
Victory: -
Best: 9th
- 2011 One More Day by Eldrine, with 110 points
- 2010: Shine by Sopho Nizharadze, with 136 points
Semi Finals: Qualified 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2015

Recent History

2015: Warrior, by Nina Sublatti, 11th place with 51 points
2014: Three Minutes to Earth, by The Shin & Mariko, 15th in the semi with 15 points
2013: Waterfall, by Nodi & Sophi, 15th with 50 points
2012: I'm a Joker by Anri Jokhadze, 14th in the semi with 36 points

2016 Selection

On December 15th Georgian broadcaster GPB announced that alt-rock band Young Georgian Lolitaz would perform for the country in Stockholm, and a public call for songs followed. Five songs were presented on February 3rd, and the Georgian public had a week to mull over the entries and select their favorite. Those votes overwhelmingly favored 'Midnight Gold', with an international jury slightly favoring eventual runner-up 'Sugar and Milk'.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

I have to admit, I kind of dig Georgia's current pattern of alternating slick, tailor-made Eurovision songs ('*Waterfall*', '*Warrior*') with quirky oddities like their Jazz Fusion freakout from 2014 and this slightly murky indie-rock number that rides a crunchy bass groove for three minutes without ever really landing on an instantly accessible vocal hook. It has no chance of qualifying, obviously, but it feels like a noble experiment rather than a self-indulgent one.

Samantha says...

The first album I ever bought with my own money was '*(What's the Story) Morning Glory*' by Oasis, so hearing '*Midnight Gold*' just brought me right back to my local Tower Records in 1995. When I talk about wanting to see more innovation on the Eurovision scene, this is what I'm talking about. It goes away from the traditional A-B-A-B-C-B song structure and it makes me wish for more than three minutes with the artist. I just hope that YGL can take their staging and make it feel like an intimate garage band jam rather than trying too hard to take this gritty, organic song and turn it into an arena-filler. I have little hope that it will qualify, but three cheers to Georgia for shaking up the status quo and rustling some jimmies.

Your Notes

Germany

At a Glance

Song: Ghost
Artist: Jaime-Lee Kriewitz
Composer: Thomas Burchia, Conrad Hensel, Anna Leyne
Lyricist: Thomas Burchia, Conrad Hensel, Anna Leyne
Performing: Automatic Qualifier for the Final; placement to be determined.

About the Artist

One of 2016's youngest artists, 18-year-old Jamie-Lee Kriewitz hails from the small town of Benningsen, near Hanover. She took part in the fifth season of The Voice of Germany under the guidance of Michi and Smudo from Die Fantastischen Vier, eventually winning the series with 38% of the total vote. Interested in the music and fashion of Korean and Japan, these styles often influence her music and look.

Germany in Eurovision

Appearances: 60
Debut: 1956
Victory: 2
- 1982: Ein Bisschen Frieden by Nicole, with 161 points
- 2010: Satellite by Lena Meyer-Landrut, with 246 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Auto-qualify (Big 5)

Recent History

2015: Black Smoke, by Ann Sophie, 27th place with 0 points
2014: Is It Right, by Elaiza, 18th with 39 points
2013: Glorious, by Cascada, 21st with 18 points
2012: Standing Still, by Roman Lob, 8th with 110 points

2016 Selection

Following the failed internal selection of Xavier Naidoo, who was withdrawn due to allegations of racist and homophobic acts and speech, Unser Lied für Stockholm was scheduled for February 25th. Ten artists competed for three spots in a superfinal, decided completely through a public televote. The Voice of Germany winner Jamie-Lee Kriewitz, symphonic metal act Avantasia, and singer-songwriter Alex Diehl all qualified for the next round, with Kriewitz winning the second round with 44.5% of the total vote.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Last year, Slovenia suffered from a visual gimmick that distracted from rather than elevating their performance, and I believe it cost them a better placing than they received in the final. I fear Germany are in for a similar fate this year. 'Ghost' is a lovely little song, if perhaps a little low-key for Eurovision. How many half-drunk viewers are going to hook into the emotion though, and how many are going to instantly zero in on the fact that she looks like she was caught up in an explosion in a Hello Kitty store? I'm all for staying true to your personal style, but Barbara Dex is calling...

Samantha says...

I love this modern, introspective song, with its lyrics feeling like they're ripped straight from an intellectual teenager's diary. I love Jamie-Lee, who's fiercely honoring the quirky nature that makes her her. I really just wish that Jamie-Lee's image lined up a bit more with the song. For viewers who don't understand who this girl is, and just see someone wearing a crazy costume, I fear that they might be turned off. Japan and Korea both have long histories of supernatural tales...if there was a way to reconcile those traditions with a global style, it may be easier for audiences around the world to connect with.

Your Notes

Greece

At a Glance

Song: Utopian Land
Artist: Argo
Composer: Vladimiros Sofianidis
Lyricist: Vladimiros Sofianidis
Performing: 2nd in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Pontic folk group Argo (who formerly went by the name Europond) has been around since 2006, blending the musical style found on the coast of the Black Sea with current Western sounds, including pop and rap. The members of Argo are Christina Lachana (vocals), Maria Venetikidou (backing vocals), Vladimiros Sofianidis (vocals), Kostas Topouzis (Pontian lyra), Ilias Kesidis, (backing vocals, percussion) and Alekos Papadopoulos (davul, a type of double-headed drum).

Greece in Eurovision

Appearances: 37
Debut: 1974
Victory: 1
- 2005: My Number One by Elena Paparizou, with 230 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified 2004-2015

Recent History

2015: One Last Breath, by Maria-Elena Kyriakou, 19th place with 23 points
2014: Rise Up, by Freaky Fortune and RiskyKidd, 20th with 35 points
2013: Alcohol is Free, by Koza Mostra, 6th with 152 points
2012: Aphrodisiac, by Eleftheria Eleftheriou, 17th with 64 points

2016 Selection

For the first time since 2004, Greece turned to a full internal selection for their Eurovision artist. Newly-reformed broadcaster ERT revealed that Argo was the country's choice on February 9th, and 'Utopian Land' was launched on March 10th.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

I like that this is a Greek entry that actually features some Greek lyrics - and in the Pontic dialect, no less! I also appreciate the ethnic elements in the arrangement, and I'm not as allergic to rap as many Eurovision fans. There's an obvious underdog narrative here that should serve Greece well in light of their recent financial and political troubles. My concern is that this has the potential to look and sound very basic and low-budget on the Globen stage. Unless sympathy is high, Greece could be in for their first year outside the finals here.

Samantha says...

Greece this year is such a wild-card. I adore the fact that it's so ethnic, and embraces local flair more than any other song this year. However, I'm not feeling the English choruses, and hip-hop tends to be very hit-or-miss on the Eurovision scoreboard. Also, the song's promo video offers no real clues on how the song will be staged in Stockholm since the band is six members and there will be no space for a shirtless jogger. The song's grown on me after a few listens, but I honestly have no clue if there's enough here for a Saturday night appearance.

Your Notes

Hungary

At a Glance

Song: Pioneer
Artist: Freddy
Composer: Zé Szabó
Lyricist: Borbála Csarnai
Performing: 4th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Alfréd Fehérvári Gábor, who goes by Freddie, is a 26-year-old Budapest native. He took part in the first season of Rising Star, eventually coming in 4th place. He launched his first single, 'Mary Joe', written by András Kállay-Saunders, soon after the show.

Hungary in Eurovision

Appearances: 14
Debut: 1994
Victory: -
Best: 4th - 1994: Kinek mondjam el vétkeimet? by Frederika Bayer, with 122 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2005, 2007, 2011-2015

Recent History

2015: Wars for Nothing, by Boggie, 20th place with 19 points
2014: Running, by András Kállay-Saunders, 5th with 143 points
2013: Kedvesem, by ByeAlex, 10th with 84 points
2012: Sound of our Hearts, by Compact Disco, 24th with 19 points

2016 Selection

For the fifth edition of Hungary's A Dal, a total of thirty entries were narrowed down to eight via a series of heats and semifinals. On the night of the final, held on February 27th, a four-member jury of local music professionals chose their top four acts, and the Hungarian public voted on the eventual winner. Freddie took the win in the end, beating 2014 Hungarian Eurovision alum András Kállay-Saunders's 'Who We Are'.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

I've heard this at least 20 times and I still couldn't tell you anything about how the chorus goes, except that the singer has that Aaron Lewis from Staind "gargling a bag of nails" vocal style that I really don't get along with. Hungary have been a consistent presence in the finals over the past few years, and they could well qualify again with this, but it's a no from me.

Samantha says...

You can tell that Hungary's trying to take a bit of a page from Sweden's win last year. Big, anthemic song about overcoming obstacles to reach one's ultimate potential, sung by an impossibly good-looking man...check, check, and biiiiiig check. (Seriously, I think Freddie's cheekbones could cut concrete.) It's not as immediate as 'Heroes', and who knows what their staging will be like. Freddie's got a tough Semifinal ahead of him, but he's sandwiched between weaker entries from Greece and Moldova...it could very well squeak into the Finals.

Your Notes

Iceland

At a Glance

Song: Hear Them Calling
Artist: Greta Salóme
Composer: Greta Salóme Stefánsdóttir
Lyricist: Greta Salóme Stefánsdóttir
Performing: 16th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Greta Salóme Stefánsdóttir is already a known entity to Eurovision fans; she and Jónsi represented Iceland in 2012. Their song 'Never Forget' came in 20th place. She is also a violinist with the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra, and has toured as a featured performer on Disney Cruise Lines. She is currently working on her second album; the first, *In the Silence*, was released in 2012.

Iceland in Eurovision

Appearances: 29
Debut: 1986
Victory: -
Best: 2nd
- 1999: All Out of Luck by Selma, with 146 points
- 2009: Is It True? by Yohanna, with 218 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2004, 2008-2014

Recent History

2015: Unbroken, by Maria Olafs, 15th in the semi with 14 points
2014: No Prejudice, by Pollapönk, 15th with 58 points
2013: Ég Á Líf, by Eyþór Ingi Gunnlaugsson, 17th with 47 points
2012: Never Forget, by Greta Salóme & Jónsi, 20th with 46 points

2016 Selection

Söngvakeppnin 2016, which marked the 30th anniversary of Iceland's participation in Eurovision, brought together a dozen acts, which were narrowed down to six for the Final, held on February 20th. While songs were presented in Icelandic during the Semifinal, artists in the Final were allowed to perform the translated versions of their song. Two songs eventually qualified for the superfinal after a national jury and televote weighed in. Greta Salóme Stefánsdóttir's 'Hear them Calling' (known in Icelandic as 'Raddirnar') went up against Ísland Got Talent champion Alda Dís Arnardóttir, who sang 'Now' ('Augnablik' in Icelandic). Greta Salóme took with win with just over 61% of the second round of voting.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

For me, this is a masterclass in how you build and release tension over the course of a three minute Eurovision song. Every element of this song has been meticulously thought through and positioned for maximum impact, from the soft and intriguing opening verse to the introduction of the brass and string sections as the song progresses. The drop out and thundering return for the final chorus is a real 'hairs on the back of the neck' moment for me. I just hope the viewers don't get too hung up on the fact that Greta is using a somewhat similar visual trick to Måns Zelmerlöw last year, because this is a really high wire act that deserves to give Iceland their best result in many a year.

Samantha says...

As a casual fan of Of Monsters and Men, '*Hear Them Calling*' checks the right boxes for me. Balancing delicate verses with blasts of bombast and lovely harmonies, slightly surreal lyrics...seriously, take a moment and listen to '*Dirty Paws*', '*Little Talks*' and '*Mountain Sound*', and tell me that Greta Salóme isn't tapping into a current and popular Icelandic sound. I judge a song by if it makes my heart beat just a touch faster when I hear it; and this feels like a shot of adrenaline.

Your Notes

Ireland

At a Glance

Song: Sunlight
Artist: Nicky Byrne
Composer: Nicky Byrne, Wayne Hector and Ronan Hardiman
Lyricist: Nicky Byrne, Wayne Hector and Ronan Hardiman
Performing: 7th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Dublin native Nicky Byrne is best known as one-fifth of the wildly popular Irish boyband Westlife, which landed ten Number One albums in their homeland (including a pair of Greatest Hits collections), and charted numerous hits across Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. After the group disbanded in 2012, Nicky tried his hand at television and radio broadcasting and now hosts a late-morning radio show on RTÉ 2fm. He is also known to Eurovision fans as Ireland's spokesperson from 2013 through 2015, giving the country's douze points to Emmelie de Forest, Conchita Wurst, and Aminata Savadogo.

Ireland in Eurovision

Appearances: 50
Debut: 1965
Victory: 7

- 1970: All Kinds of Everything by Dana, with 32 points
- 1980: Whats Another Year? by Johnny Logan, with 143 points
- 1987: Hold Me Now by Johnny Logan, with 172 points
- 1992: Why Me? by Linda Martin, with 155 points
- 1993: In Your Eyes by Niamh Kavanagh, with 187 points
- 1994: Rock n Roll Kids by Paul Harrington and Charlie McGettigan, with 226 points
- 1996: The Voice by Eimear Quinn, with 162 points

Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2004, 2006, 2010-2013

Recent History

2015: Playing with Numbers, by Molly Sterling, 12th in the semi with 35 points
2014: Heartbeat, by Can-Linn feat. Kasey Smith, 12th in the semi with 35 points
2013: Only Love Survives, by Ryan Dolan, 26th with 5 points
2012: Waterline, by Jedward, 19th with 46 points

2016 Selection

For the first time in its 49-year history at Eurovision, RTÉ decided to go for a completely internal selection. After weeks of swirling rumors, Nicky Byrne's participation for Ireland was confirmed, and 'Sunlight' was launched on January 13th.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

I know we all love a national selection, but can we all agree that the death of Ireland's Late Late Show was long, long overdue? There's no way a star of Nicky Byrne's calibre would have put himself through the Louis Walsh/Linda Martin wringer, so kudos to the RTE team for raising their game this year. With all that in mind, it's a bit of a shame that Nicky's song falls a little flat for me. It's competent enough to be worthy of a place in the finals, but it's yet another faintly anonymous radio song that fills the space for three minutes, takes no risks and makes no real impression. With Sweden breathing down their necks, Ireland need to really up the stakes to keep hold of their crown, and this feels like a defensive maneuver when they should be going in for the kill.

Samantha says...

It's great that Ireland's finally revamping their National Final setup. It's fabulous that they're bringing in a big name with tons of experience. It's just a shame that the song that they're bringing to the table is just kind of...there. In a year where they're at risk of Sweden stealing their Eurovision primacy, and they bring a song that simply lacks the fire-in-the-belly quality that says "I'm in it to win". There's nothing particularly wrong with this song...but there's nothing truly right about it, either.

Your Notes

Israel

At a Glance

Song: Made of Stars
Artist: Hovi Star
Composer: Doron Medalie
Lyricist: Doron Medalie
Performing: 4th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Twenty-nine-year old Hovav Sekulets, who goes by the stage name Hovi Star, was born near the city of Haifa. After performing his mandated military service (in which he was a member of one of the Israeli Defense Force's entertainment troupes), Hovi took part in the seventh series of Kokhav Nolad, eventually coming in coming in seventh place. (Interestingly, fellow Eurovision alum Mei Feingold also participated in that series, coming in third). Following that, he released a few singles on the Israeli market and did voice-over work for the Hebrew-language dubs of a number of Disney and Pixar films.

Israel in Eurovision

Appearances: 38
Debut: 1 973
Victory: 3
- 1978: A-Ba-Ni-Bi by Izhar Cohen and Alphabeta, with 157 points
- 1979: Hallelujah by Milk and Honey, with 125 points
- 1998: Diva by Dana International, with 172 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2015

Recent History

2015: Golden Boy, by Nadav Guedj, 9th with 97 points
2014: Same Heart, by Mei Finegold, 14th in the semi with 19 points
2013: Rak Bishvilo, by Moran Mazor, 14th in the semi with 40 points
2012: Time, by Izabo, 13th in the semi with 33 points

2016 Selection

For the second year running, Israeli broadcaster IBA used the show HaKokhav HaBa to select their singer for Eurovision. Unlike last year, however, the four remaining contestants performed their potential songs for the international competition on the night of the Final, March 3rd. Following a set of duels and a wild-card selected by the show's jury, Ella Daniel's 'Somebody Out There' and 'Made of Stars', performed by both Hovi Star and Nofar Salman, were played for the public and the singer with the highest instant rating by the audience was given the ticket to Sweden. Hovi's performance ended up with 68% approval, just edging out Nofar's version of the same song by a single percentage point. Soon after the show, it was announced that Hovi and his team would revamp 'Made of Stars', and transformed it from a dramatic glam-rock song to a more introspective ballad.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

The problem with Israel's selection process is that it put all the focus on vocal performance. That's an important factor, and there's no question Hovi Star can deliver what's required of him, but there's just no song here at all. Potentially the most boring three minutes of this year's competition. Bring back the Golden Boys.

Samantha says...

Looking at all of the preview events that Hovi's taken part in, you can tell he's bursting with personality. I just wish that '*Made of Stars*', in its current form, allowed more of that personality to shine through. The version that we heard him sing on "*Rising Star*" brought more of that Adam Lambert-style sass and bombast, but this feels sort of...neutered. Vocally, this is beautiful, I just wish there was more of him in it.

Your Notes

Italy

At a Glance

Song: No Degree of Separation
Artist: Francesca Michielin
Composer: Fabio Gargiulo, Federica Abbate, Cheope
Lyricist: Francesca Michielin, Federica Abbate, Norma Jean Martine
Performing: Automatic Qualifier for the Final; placement to be determined.

About the Artist

Francesca Michielin is a twenty-one year old singer from Bassano del Grappa in northeastern Italy. In 2012 at the age of just sixteen, she won the fifth series of X Factor. A number-one single ('Distratto') and top-five album (Riflessi di me) soon followed. Following the release of her second album, di20, Francesca headlined her first concert tour.

Italy in Eurovision

Appearances: 42
Debut: 1956
Victory: 2
- 1964: Non ho l'età by Gigliola Cinquetti, with 49 points
- 1990: Insieme: 1992 by Toto Cutugno, with 149 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Auto-qualify (Big 5)

Recent History

2015: Grade Amore, by Il Volo, 3rd with 292 points
2014: La mia città, by Emma Marrone, 21st with 33 points
2013: L'Essenziale, by Marco Mengoni, 7th with 126 points
2012: L'Amore È Femmina (Out Of Love), by Nina Zilli, 9th with 101 points

2016 Selection

Like last year, the winner of the Sanremo Music Festival was offered the first option to represent Italy at Eurovision. After five long nights of performances, comedy, and celebrity interviews, veteran rockers Stadio won at the Teatro Ariston, but due to prior commitments, declined the ticket to Stockholm. Runner-up Francesca Michielin accepted the opportunity, and after editing the song for time and language, will send a bilingual version of 'Nessun grado di separazione'.

Interestingly, Francesca's ranking in Sanremo was higher than both Arisa and Elio e le Storie Tese, both of whom were coaches on her season of X Factor.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

I can't quite articulate why, but something about this song really moves me. It has a beguiling, plaintive quality that tells a story even if you don't understand the lyric. I wish it was still 100% in Italian, but the switch to English isn't as jarring as I feared. Possibly a little too subtle and lyrical to really do well, but I'll be rooting for this one.

Samantha says...

Sometimes, simplicity, subtlety, and sweetness just work. There's a charming vulnerability about Francesca, like the shy girl in your high school algebra class who's just waiting to bust out of her shell, especially after the big men on campus sang for the country last year. In terms of pure musical merit, this is gorgeous, but I just worry that it lacks the instantly engaging quality that other songs this year have.

Your Notes

Latvia

At a Glance

Song: Heartbeat
Artist: Justs
Composer: Aminata Savadogo
Lyricist: Aminata Savadogo
Performing: 1st in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Justs Sirmāis is a relative newcomer onto the Latvian scene, having previously lent his vocal talents to local bands like TaxFree, Bunch of Gentlemen, and hip-hop act Gacho. A former street musician, Justs is currently studying to be a music teacher.

Latvia in Eurovision

Appearances: 17
Debut: 2000
Victory: 1
- 2002: I Wanna by Marie N, with 176 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2005-2008 and 2015

Recent History

2015: Love Injected by Aminata, 6th place with 186 points
2014: Cake to Bake, by Aarzemnieki, 13th in the semi with 33 points
2013: Here We Go, by PeR, 17th in the semi with 13 points
2012: Beautiful Song, by Anmary, 16th in the semi with 17 points

2016 Selection

For the second year running, Latvia has selected its artist for Eurovision through the show Supernova. Twenty songs went through a series of heats, judged by a televote and professional jury, to create a shortlist of eight, which proceeded to a semifinal. On February 28th, the remaining four songs were voted upon entirely by the Latvian public, which selected 'Heartbeat' written by 2015 Eurovision performer Aminata Savadogo.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Aminata strikes again! She may be behind the scenes this year, but her elegant electro-pop style is all over this beguiling entry. With the photogenic Justs providing a strong vocal presence, Latvia should be two for two here - and who'd pass up the chance for another trip to Riga?

Samantha says...

There's so much I love about "Heartbeat"; the arrangement that feels so produced, yet so sparse, the rough quality in Justs's voice, the return of the ever-fabulous Aminata...but there's one thing that's been taking me out of the moment when I watch the song being performed. Justs's delivery just doesn't quite connect with the song. He's singing about loneliness, desperation, and blame, yet he's constantly smiling. If he can train that out of himself, we may have a contender for Top Ten.

Your Notes

Lithuania

At a Glance

Song: I've Been Waiting For This Night
Artist: Donny Montell
Composer: Jonas Thander, Beatrice Robertsson
Lyricist: Jonas Thander, Beatrice Robertsson
Performing: 9th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

No stranger to the Eurovision family, Donny Montell (born Donatas Montvydas) performed on behalf of Lithuania in Baku in 2012, coming in 14th place in the Final and 3rd in its Semifinal, giving the country its highest placement ever at the Semifinal level and third highest overall. Prior to that, Donny had sent five songs to the National Final, coming as high as second. He was also the 2008 champion at the Slavianski Bazaar in Vitebsk, Belarus, and since 2012, has been a coach on Lietuvos Balsas, the local edition of The Voice.

Lithuania in Eurovision

Appearances: 17
Debut: 1994
Victory: - Best: 6th
- 2006: We Are the Winners by LT United, with 162 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2006, 2007, 2009, 2011 - 2013, and 2015

Recent History

2015: This Time, by Monika Linkytė & Vaidas Baumila, 18th place with 30 points
2014: Attention, by Viliija 11th in the semi with 36 points
2013: Something, by Andrius Pojavis, 22nd with 17 points
2012: Love is Blind, by Donny Montell, 14th with 70 points

2016 Selection

As seen in recent years, the only thing longer than the name of Lithuania's national final ("Eurovizijos dainų konkurso nacionalinė atranka") was the selection process itself. Starting on January 9th and proceeding weekly until March 12th's Final (and beyond that, if you count the show held on March 28th, a fundraiser for Lithuania's Eurovision participation), the National Final was must-see TV on LRT for over two months. When all was said and done, Donny Montell's 'I've Been Waiting For This Night' won both the final jury and televote over Erica Jennings's 'Leading Me Home', and Rūta Ščiogolevaitė's 'United'.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Donny Montell's second bite at the Eurovision cherry is a lot more slick than his first, but personally I miss the goofy, slightly awkward charm that characterised 'Love Is Blind' in 2012. From the Danny Saucedo-esque production to Donny's beefed up physique, this is pop music with all of the rough edges smoothed away, leaving a credible but strangely hollow-feeling final product.

Samantha says...

It's amazing what a few years, a few extra pounds of muscle, and more production can do, isn't it? Donny's back (sans blindfold) with a slick party track that at the very least will get the crowd pumped up and moving, and very well may top his result from 2012. It's not the most original thing on the planet, but it's certainly enjoyable, and in a year as wide-open as this seems to be, I wouldn't completely cut Vilnius 2017 out of the equation.

Your Notes

Macedonia

At a Glance

Song: Dona
Artist: Kaliopi
Composer: Romeo Grill
Lyricist: Kaliopi
Performing: 8th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Kaliopi is one of Macedonia's most enduring and popular performers, launching her pop career back in the mid-1980s. She was actually selected to be the nation's first representative at Eurovision, back in 1996, but her song 'Samo ti' was eliminated in that year's non-televised pre-selection. She finally got her chance to go to Eurovision in 2012, with her song 'Crno i belo', which gave the country its second-highest placement ever.

Macedonia in Eurovision

Appearances: 17
Debut: 1998
Victory: -
Best: 12th - 2006: Ninanajna by Elena Risteska, with 56 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2004-2007, 2012. Did not qualify in 2008-2011 or 2013-2014.

Recent History

2015: Autumn Leaves, by Daniel Kajmakoski, 15th in the semi with 28 points
2014: To the Sky, by Tijana, 13th in the semi with 33 points
2013: Pred Da Se Razdeni, by Esma & Lozano, 16th in the semi with 28 points
2012: Crno I Belo, by Kaliopi, 13th with 71 points

2016 Selection

An internal selection, Kaliopi was announced as Macedonia's entrant for Stockholm on November 24, with her song, 'Dona' released on March 7th.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

I'd have Macedonia's Grande Dame in the contest every year if I could, but she's not quite firing on all cylinders with this one. '*Crno i belo*' gave her the space to showcase all of her vocal colours and take us on an emotional journey that transcended language. '*Dona*' limits her to belting out a repetitive one-word hook over a strangely chintzy arrangement. She's bound to bring her A-game on the night, but a voice like Kaliopi's deserves better material.

Samantha says...

Kaliopi had previously said that she'd return to Eurovision if she had a better song than 2012's '*Crno i Belo*', which means she's setting herself up for endless comparisons with her previous work. As much as I love Kaliopi's voice, her charm, and her presence, this song simply doesn't match up. Her past entry was so epic (I still get chills when I hear that scream...), but '*Dona*' doesn't do anything to push her legacy forward.

Your Notes

Malta

At a Glance

Song: Walk on Water
Artist: Ira Losco
Composer: Lisa Desmond, Tim Larsson, Tobias Lundgren, Molly Pettersson-Hammar & Ira Losco
Lyricist: Lisa Desmond, Tim Larsson, Tobias Lundgren, Molly Pettersson-Hammar & Ira Losco
Performing: 18th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Arguably one of Malta's biggest pop stars, Ira Losco has been prominent on the scene since the late 1990s when she was part of the girl-band Tiara. At Eurovision 2002 in Tallinn, Estonia, she sang '*7th Wonder*', bringing the country its highest placement to date. Since then, she has released four albums (with a fifth on the way), and in 2008 Ira was bestowed with the Medal for Service to the Republic.

Malta in Eurovision

Appearances: 29
Debut: 1971
Victory: - Best: 2nd
- 2002: 7th Wonder by Ira Losco, with 164 points
- 2005: Angel by Chiara, with 192 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2004 - 2006, 2009, 2012 - 2014

Recent History

2015: Warrior, by Amber, 11th place in the semi with 43 points
2014: Coming Home, by Firelight, 23rd with 32 points
2013: Tomorrow, by Gianluca, 8th with 120 points
2012: This is the Night, by Kurt Calleja, 21st with 41 points

2016 Selection

The Malta Eurovision Song Contest 2016 was held at the Mediterranean Conference Center in Valletta, with a twenty-song semifinal held on January 22nd, followed by a fourteen-song final the next day. The winner on the night, Ira Losco's '*Chameleon*', was decided via a five-member international jury and a nationwide televote, which acted as a sixth juror.

After the National Final, Ira and Maltese broadcaster PBS decided to invoke their ability to modify or completely change their selected entry. A number of songs, including a revamped version of '*Chameleon*', were sent to juries of musicians and musical professionals from around Europe and within Malta, resulting in the selection of '*Walk on Water*', which was revealed on March 17th.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Ira Losco's narrow defeat at the hands of Latvia's Marie N in 2002 is one of my earliest and most traumatic Eurovision memories, so nothing would make me happier than to see her finally correct that injustice and secure Malta a long overdue first victory. Alas, 'Walk on Water' isn't quite of the calibre to give me that much closure, but it's a polished slice of modern radio pop delivered with just enough poise and confidence to make up for the slightly forgettable melody.

Samantha says...

It's always nice to see Malta send something positive and uplifting without it sounding too Disney-esque or treacly. Ira looks and sounds better than ever, and this really has the potential for some amazing staging. I'm not sure if it's immediate enough to take the win, but this should bring the sunny island back to the Finals and give Ira a great springboard as she prepares to launch her next album.

Your Notes

Moldova

At a Glance

Song: Falling Stars
Artist: Lidia Isac
Composer: Gabriel Alares, Sebastian Lestapier, Ellen Berg, Leonid Gutkin
Lyricist: Gabriel Alares, Sebastian Lestapier, Ellen Berg, Leonid Gutkin
Performing: 3rd in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Lidia Isac first appeared on the Moldovan music scene as one half of the duo Glam Girls, who attempted to represent the country at Eurovision in 2013, 2014, and 2015. Lidia also submitted a solo entry to last year's National Final, but came in last with nul points. She also took part in the 2014 edition of "New Wave", held in Jūrmala, Latvia.

Moldova in Eurovision

Appearances: 12
Debut: 2005
Victory: - Best: 6th
- 2005: Boonika Bate Doba by Zdob si Zdub, with 148 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2005 - 2007, 2009-2013

Recent History

2015: I Want Your Love, by Eduard Romanyuta, 11th in the semi with 41 points

2014: Wild Soul, by Christina Scarlat, 16th in the semi with 13 points

2013: O Mie, by Aliona Moon, 11th with 71 points

2012: Lautar, by Pasha Parfeny, 11th with 81 points

2016 Selection

Following an open call for songs, Moldova's "O Melodie Pentru Europa 2016" held its semifinals on February 23rd and 25th, with a sixteen-song Final on February 27th. An eleven-member jury and public televote resulted in Lidia Isac's 'Falling Stars' taking the victory.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Moldova used to be one of Eurovision's most reliably barmy participants, but they seem to have lost their way a little recently. 'Falling Stars' is a welcome slice of classic Eurovision that could have been entered into the 2005 contest and wouldn't have sounded much different. I'm always in favour of a bit of fan service, but I expect more from the country that gave us Epic Sax Man and high-kickin' Nelly Ciobanu.

Samantha says...

Well, it's a song. It feels like it would have done well at Eurovision about ten years ago, but the Contest has evolved and moved on since then while this song (or at least this arrangement) simply feels frozen in time. Knowing this came from the songwriting team behind 'A Million Voices' simply disappoints me, like it came from their clearance rack and they had blow the dust off before sending it to Chisinau.

Your Notes

Montenegro

At a Glance

Song: The Real Thing
Artist: Highway
Composer: Srđan Sekulović Skansi, Maro Market, Luka Vojvodić
Lyricist: Srđan Sekulović Skansi, Maro Market, Luka Vojvodić
Performing: 15th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Petar Tošić, Marko Pešić, Luka Vojvodić, performing as Highway, were the third runners-up (and highest-ranking Montenegrins) in the second series of X-Factor Adria. Soon after Highway was announced as Montenegro's Eurovision representatives in Stockholm, the trio was joined by Bojan Jovović, formerly of the band No Name, who represented a then-united Serbia and Montenegro at Eurovision 2005.

Montenegro in Eurovision

Appearances: 8
Debut: 2007
Victory: -
Best: 13th
- 2015: Adio, by Knez, with 44 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2014 and 2015

Recent History

2015: Adio, by Knez, 13th place with 44 points
2014: Moj svijet, by Sergei Ćetković, 19th with 37 points
2013: Igranka, by Who See, 12th in the semi with 41 points
2012: Euro Neuro, by Rambo Amadeus, 15th in the semi with 20 points
2011: -

2016 National Selection

Going for another internal selection, broadcaster RTCG revealed on October 2nd that rock band Highway would represent the nation in Sweden this year. Their song, "*The Real Thing*", was unveiled on March 4th.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Oh dear. Suddenly I'm 16 again and my little brother is blasting the hits of Limp Bizkit through the bedroom walls while contemplating a series of incredibly ill-advised body piercings. I respect Georgia's stab at bringing guitars to Eurovision because their song feels confident and authentic. This lumpen dirge, however, just feels formless and self-indulgent. The recent Montenegrin renaissance at the Contest ends here I'm afraid.

Samantha says...

Well, good on the Montenegrins for taking a risk and sending something different. However, this just feels repetitive and tuneless, and the lyrics get a little bit disconcerting at times (as in, the male singer is fighting for the love that he feels is right, but the object of his affections simply does not seem as enthusiastic...). I'd love to see more rock at Eurovision, but this does nothing for me.

Your Notes

Norway

At a Glance

Song: Icebreaker
Artist: Agnete
Composer: Agnete Johnsen, Gabriel Alares, Ian Curnow
Lyricist: Agnete Johnsen, Gabriel Alares, Ian Curnow
Performing: 15th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Twenty-one-year-old Agnete Kristin Johnsen hails from Nesseby, in Norway's extreme north. A member of Norway's Sami community, she was first introduced to the Norwegian public as the lead singer of the youth pop-rock band The BlackSheeps, which won MGP Nordic (a pan-Nordic children's musical festival, similar to Junior Eurovision) in 2008. Their song, '*Oro jaska, beana*', which was performed in Norwegian and Sami, reached number one on the local charts. In 2011, The BlackSheeps took part in Melodi Grand Prix, but came in second place with 'Dance Tonight', behind Stella Mwangi's '*Haba Haba*'. The band split up that year, and Agnete has gone on to record as a soloist.

Norway in Eurovision

Appearances: 55
Debut: 1960
Victory: 3
- 1985: La Det Swinge by Bobbysocks, with 123 points
- 1995: Nocturne by Secret Garden, with 148 points
- 2009: Fairytale by Alexander Rybak, with 387 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2004, 2005, 2006, 2008 - 2010, 2012 - 2015

Recent History

2015: A Monster Like Me, by Mørland & Debrah Scarlett, 8th place with 104 points
2014: Silent Storm, by Carl Espen, 8th with 88 points
2013: I Feed You My Love, by Margaret Berger, 4th with 191 points
2012: Stay, by Tooji, 26th with 7 points

2016 Selection

Melodi Grand Prix 2016 was a one-night-only affair, held on February 27th. Ten songs went up for a public televote, and the top four proceeded to the "Gold Final". Agnete's '*Icebreaker*', Laila Samuel's '*Afterglow*', Freddy Kalas's '*Feel Da Rush*', and Suite 16's '*Anna Lee*' then went up against a second public vote, with Agnete beating the competition soundly with nearly double the votes of the first runner-up.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Norway have been quietly pushing the envelope with their Eurovision entries for the past few years, and it's an approach that's served them well. On the surface, '*Icebreaker*' might sound like one of their more run-of-the-mill efforts, but the dramatic tempo change between the verse and the chorus is quite the confidence trick. It won't appeal to everyone, but personally I think it's inspired and goes a long way towards compensating for the fact that neither the verse nor the chorus is especially striking individually...

Samantha says...

People keep saying that Norway's an expensive country, but look at the value they're giving us this year! Two songs for the price of one! In all seriousness, it's very cool to see Agnete evolve as an artist from her days in the BlackSheeps, and the song's vibe reminds me quite a bit of '*I Feed You My Love*' and Karin Park's '*Human Beings*' from the National Final last year. However, a time signature change is a very difficult thing to pull off and runs the risk of sounding very jarring if done incorrectly. For an example of a well done time-signature change, put this guidebook down for three minutes and watch '*Golden Boy*' (Israel 2015). We'll be here when you get back.

Your Notes

Poland

At a Glance

Song: Color of Your Life
Artist: Michał Szpak
Composer: Andy Palmer, Kamil Varen
Lyricist: Andy Palmer, Kamil Varen
Performing: 2nd in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Michał Szpak was the runner-up on the first series of Poland's X-Factor back in 2011. Since then, he's released an EP (XI) and a full-length album (Byle być sobą), come in fifth place on Dancing with the Stars: Taniec z gwiazdami, and has performed at a number of local festivals including the National Festival of Polish Song in Opole and the Russian Song Festival 2013 in Zielona Góra.

Poland in Eurovision

Appearances: 19
Debut: 1994
Victory: -
Best: 2nd
1994: To nie ja! by Edyta Gornyak with 166 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2008 and 2014-2015

Recent History

2015: In the Name of Love, by Monika Kuszyńska, 23rd with 10 points
2014: My Słowianie (We Are Slavic), by Donatan & Cleo, 14th with 62 points
2013: -
2012: -

2016 Selection

For the first time since 2011, Polish broadcaster TVP held a National Selection for Eurovision. Krajowe Eliminacje 2016 was held on March 5th, and nine songs vied for the title. Among the contestants were Edyta Górniak, who gave Poland their best result upon their debut back in 1994; locally successful pop songstress (and overwhelming fan favorite) Margaret; and Napoli, the runners-up from Belarus's National Final. After a 100% televote, Michał Szpak took a surprise win with a convincing 35.89% of the total ballot.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Tell me, black or white / what colour is your life? - Seriously, those are the only options? Michał, honey, this is Eurovision. Be the whole damn rainbow. Sadly, the only colour that comes to mind for this po-faced ballad is beige.

Samantha says...

Let's all just take a moment to let out a primal scream for what could have been.

Feel better? Okay, now that we've got the memory of Margaret's "*Cool Me Down*" out of our system, let's focus on what Poland is actually sending, rather than hypotheticals that always leave us heartbroken.

Michał has a great voice and an ability to connect with an audience, which obviously served him well on the X-Factor and the National Final this year. His song is understated, but still allows for him to unleash some impressive vocals. The song doesn't strike me as anything special, but Michał does.

Your Notes

Romania

(Yes, we know...)

At a Glance

Song: Moment of Silence
Artist: Ovidiu Anton
Composer: Ovidiu Anton
Lyricist: Ovidiu Anton
Performing: Disqualified on April 22nd.

About the Artist

Bucharest-born Ovidiu Anton has been rocking Romania since the age of fifteen when he formed his first band, Carpe Diem. He later became the lead singer of the band Pasager, which participated at the 2010 National Final. Going it alone, Ovidiu took part in the Selecția Națională as a soloist in 2012, 2013, and 2015, but it was his 2016 entry, '*Moment of Silence*', that's taking him to the international stage. He's also a two-time alum of the Golden Stag Festival in Brașov.

Romania in Eurovision

Appearances: 18
Debut: 1994
Victory: -
Best: 3rd
- 2005: Let Me Try by Luminița Anghel & Sistem, with 158 points
- 2010: Playing with Fire by Paula Seling & Ovi, with 162 points
Semi Finals: Qualified 2004-2015

Recent History

2015: De la capăt (All Over Again), by Voltaj, 15th place with 35 points
2014: Miracle, by Paula Seling & Ovi, 12th with 72 points
2013: It's My Life, by Cezar, 13th with 65 points
2012: Zaleilah, by Mandinga, 12th with 71 points

2016 Selection

Selecția Națională 2016 took place in the city of Baia Mare, with a twelve-contestant semifinal held on March 4th and a six-song final on March 6th. While the semifinal utilized both a jury vote and a public weigh-in, the final relied exclusively on the say of the Romanian people. Ovidiu Anton's '*Moment of Silence*' was declared the winner, even over Eurovision alum Mihai Trăistariu's heavily-hyped '*Paradisio*'.

On April 22nd, it was announced that the EBU would be revoking member services to Romanian broadcaster TVR, due to a lack of payment to the organization. This effectively forced the disqualification of Romania's entry, "*Moment of Silence*" by Ovidiu Anton. *However, to honor the hard work done by Ovidiu and his team, their efforts were included in this guidebook.*

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

If I have one complaint about this year's generally very high quality Eurovision field, it's that it's all a bit... respectable. For that reason and that reason only, this ludicrous slice of leather-clad rock opera gets a pass from me. It's like Meatloaf glueing on a soul patch and starring in a regional production of The Phantom of the Opera, and it's all the more entertaining for the fact that everybody involved appears to be playing it 100% straight. You keep doing you, Romania.

Samantha says...

How does one say "Meat Loaf" in Romanian? I'm all for having a dash of the theatrical and epic in my Eurovision, but this just feels flaccid, like an overly-dramatic high school play. Romania could very well end up losing their flawless qualification record on this...but then again, I said the same thing about Cezar...

Your Notes

Russia

At a Glance

Song: You Are the Only One
Artist: Sergey Lazarev
Composer: Philipp Kirkorov, Dimitris Kontopoulos, John Ballard, and Ralph Charlie
Lyricist: Philipp Kirkorov, Dimitris Kontopoulos, John Ballard, and Ralph Charlie
Performing: 9th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

One of Russia's biggest pop stars, Sergey Lazarev has been a performer since childhood. An original member of the kids-pop group Neposedi (where he performed alongside Lena Katina and Yulia Volkova from t.A.T.u), he and fellow Neposedi member Vlad Topalov formed the duo Smash!! in 2000. In their four years together they released three albums; won the inaugural New Wave Festival in Jurmala, Latvia; and took home the MTV Russia Music Award for Best Pop Act. Since going solo in 2004, Sergei has released four studio albums (as well as a "Best of" collection), released dozens of singles, and won two MTV Russia Music Awards. He previously tried his hand at Eurovision back in 2008, coming in 4th place at the Russian National Final with 'Flyer'.

Russia in Eurovision

Appearances: 20
Debut: 1994
Victory: 1
- 2008: Believe by Dima Bilan, with 272 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified 2004-2015

Recent History

2015: A Million Voices, by Polina Gagarina, 2nd with 303 points
2014: Shine, by the Tolmachevy Sisters, 7th with 89 points
2013: What If, by Dina Garipova, 5th with 174 points
2012: Party for Everybody, by Buranovskiye Babushki, 2nd with 259 points

2016 Selection

For the fourth year running, Russia has decided to go for an internal selection for Eurovision. Sergey Lazarev was announced as the country's performer on December 5th, and his song, 'You Are the Only One', was presented to the public on March 5th.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Not since Carola fixed her steely gaze on the Athens assembly and declared herself '*Invincible*' has a Eurovision entry been so ruthlessly constructed for the sole purpose of winning the Contest. There's nothing wrong with that, and it's hard to argue that Russia haven't earned another win with their efforts over the past few years, but for all the bells, whistles, and portentous key changes, there's something just a little bit... joyless about '*You Are The Only One*'.

Samantha says...

Yes, I know I'm about to critique the year's odd-on favorite. I kind of feel like the hapless security guard in Austin Powers yelling, "Stooooooooop!" to a slowly-progressing steamroller who eventually flattens him to a pulp. But there's nothing truly unique or special about this entry. Replace the year "2016" with "2004" and "Sergey Lazarev" with "Sakis Rouvas", and there would be almost no evolution. If this song was coming from Moldova or Portugal, I'm wondering if people would bat an eye. But as it stands, I'm bracing myself for impact (and the cost of a flight to Sochi), and hoping that the steamroller diverts course.

Your Notes

San Marino

At a Glance

Song: I Didn't Know
Artist: Serhat
Composer: Olcayto Ahmet Tuğsuz
Lyricist: Nektarios Tyrakis
Performing: 8th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Ahmet Serhat Hacıpaşalıoğlu, who goes by simply "Serhat", is a popular singer, producer, and television host based in Istanbul, Turkey. He is most famously known as the host of Riziko!, the local version of the hit American game show Jeopardy!. Through his company, End Productions, Serhat has produced a number of shows for the Turkish market, including Liselerarası Müzik Yarışması (High School Music Contest) and Dans Maratonu (Dance Marathon). He first forayed into music in 1997 with the Turkish-language singles "*Rüya*" and "*Ben Bir Daha*". Since then, he's recorded songs in English, Russian, French, and Italian.

San Marino in Eurovision

Appearances: 7
Debut: 2008
Victory: -
Best: 24th
- Maybe, by Valentina Monetta, 14 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2014

Recent History

2015: Chain of Light, by Michele Perniola & Anita Simoncini, 16th in the semi with 11 points
2014: Maybe, by Valentina Monetta, 24th with 14 points
2013: Crisalide, by Valentina Monetta, 11th in the semi with 47 points
2012: The Social Network Song, by Valentina Monetta 14th in the semi with 31 points

2016 Selection

As is appropriate for a country with too small of a population to sustain a full National Final, San Marino once again decided on an internal selection. However, rather than approaching a local, or even Italian artist, broadcaster SMRTV gave the ticket to Stockholm to Serhat, a Turkish performer who's biggest hit was in French. Serhat was announced as San Marino's singer on January 12th, and his song, 'I Didn't Know' premiered on March 9th.

On March 21st, SMRTV announced that the song's disco remix would be performed this May, rather than the song's slower original arrangement.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

At this point I'm resigned to seeing San Marino as less of a country and more Eurovision's wacky wildcard state. A creepy Leonard Cohen pastiche by the former host the Turkey's Jeopardy!? Sure, why not? A promo video that looks like the opening scene of the weirdest seventies softcore porno you ever regretted downloading? Sold! A last minute switch to a post-tracheotomy version of 'Disco Tango'? Who could resist? Eurovision has gotten far too sensible in its old age, and as long as San Marino keep delivering batshittery at this level, they must never, ever be allowed to leave us.

Samantha says...

I had such high hopes for San Marino when I heard Serhat's bouncy, saucy 'Je M'adore', but this has been such a spectacular face-plant that I'm left speechless. I'm going to cede the rest of this comment to my other half, who summarized 'I Didn't Know' in the best possible way: "The only way this song would work is if he was serenading a woman tied to a chair while a man in a tuxedo dangled over a tank full of sharks. Behind them a map of the world marking major cities traces dotted lines across countries, the paths of incoming missiles about to reduce Serhat's base beneath a dormant San Marinense volcano into a smoking crater."

Your Notes

Serbia

At a Glance

Song: Goodbye
Artist: Sanja Vučić ZAA
Composer: Ivana Peters
Lyricist: Ivana Peters
Performing: 6th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Sanja Vučić is best known as the lead singer of the Serbian ska-jazz-punk fusion band ZAA, which has given her the chance to tour heavily in the Balkans and beyond since she joined their ranks in 2012. When she's not touring, she's a student of Linguistics at the University of Belgrade.

Serbia in Eurovision

Appearances: 9
Debut: 2007
Victory: 1
Best: 1st
2007: Molitva, by Marija Šerifović, 268 points
Semi Finals: Automatic qualifier in 2008. Qualified in 2007, 2010-2012, and 2015.
Failed to qualify in 2009 & 2013.

Recent History

2015: Beauty Never Lies, by Bojana Stamenov, 10th with 53 points
2014: -
2013: Ljubav je svuda, by Moje 3, 11th in the semi with 46 points
2012: Nije ljubav stvar, by Željko Joksimović, 3rd with 214 points

2016 Selection

Serbian broadcaster RTS decided to choose their song and artist internally for 2016, marking the first time they had done so since 2012. Sanja Vučić was announced as the broadcaster's choice on March 5th, with her song 'Goodbye (*Shelter*)' following one week later.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Sanja from Serbia gives great dramatic lip curl and can certainly belt with the best of them, but this song sounds like a bit of a meandering vocal warmup exercise that takes a good two minutes before anything interesting happens. Once she gets the opportunity to really let loose, the song improves considerably, but seconds after the song is over I've already forgotten the hook.

Samantha says...

When I heard that the lead singer of Zaa, known for blending ska, reggae, punk, and rock, was coming to Eurovision, I had no idea what to expect, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't a straightforward power ballad. That said, Sanja's voice is emotive and powerful, and she's selling it with every molecule in her body. (In all honesty, the preview video is bordering on RuPaul "lipsynch for your life" territory.) "Message songs" are often hard to do without it feeling like the singer is thwacking you over the head with a moral, but this actually feels very well-balanced considering the gravity of the message. You do you, Zaa...you do you.

Your Notes

Slovenia

At a Glance

Song: Blue and Red
Artist: ManuElla
Composer: Marjan Hvala, Manuella Brečko, Leon Oblak
Lyricist: Marjan Hvala, Manuella Brečko, Leon Oblak
Performing: 11th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Manuela Brečko hails from central Slovenia where she learned accordion, bass, and piano as a child. At the age of sixteen, she took part in the local talent show Bitke talentov, and later auditioned for the German show Das Supertalent. In 2011, she attempted to represent Slovenia at Eurovision, but ended up in fourth place overall. Since then, she's been recording independently.

Slovenia in Eurovision

Appearances: 21
Debut: 1993
Victory: -
Best: 7th
- 1995: Priluhni mi by Darja Švajger, with 84 points
- 2001: Energy by Nuša Derenda, with 70 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2007, 2011, 2014-2015

Recent History

2015: Here for You, by Maraaya, 14th with 39 points
2014: Round and Round, by Tinkara Kovač, 25th with 9 points
2013: Straight Into Love, by Hannah, 16th in the semi with 8 points
2012: Verjamem, by Eva Boto, 17th in the semi with 31 points

2016 Selection

EMA 2016 brought together ten acts in a one-night-only event held on February 27th. Among the performers were Eurovision alumnae Regina (who performed '*Dan najlepših sanj*' in 1996) and Nuša Derenda (who gave Slovenia their highest placement ever with 2001's '*Energy*'). In the first round of competition, a three-member jury selected two Superfinalists, who then went head-to-head in a public televote. ManuElla's '*Blue and Red*' beat Raiven's '*Črno bel*' by only 127 televotes.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Blue is blue and red is red. This song is, on arrival, dead.

Samantha says...

Sounds like someone's been listening to a bit of early Taylor Swift, eh, ManuElla? This is certainly cute, and the little yodel before the chorus makes for a nice hook, but do Eurovision voters go for "well, that was pleasant"? This might go down as a nice song that's eleventh place on every country's list, despite having absolutely nothing wrong with it.

Also, the line "how do you mix red and blue together?" bothers me...it's called "purple".

Your Notes

Spain

At a Glance

Song: Say Yay!
Artist: Barei
Composer: Bárbara Reyzábal, Rubén Villanueva, Víctor Púa Vivó
Lyricist: Bárbara Reyzábal, Rubén Villanueva, Víctor Púa Vivó
Performing: Automatic Qualifier for the Final; placement to be determined.

About the Artist

Barei, the abbreviated stage name of Barbara Reyzábal, is a Madrid-based singer-songwriter who released her first album, *Billete para no volver*, in 2011. In 2015, Barei released her second album, *Throw the Dice*, and began finding success as a songwriter. Her compatriots Edurne and Malú both included songs she had written on their albums. While she was not a household name when she won the National Final, Barei is no stranger to competition: she took part in the Benidorm International Song Festival back in 2001, finishing second.

Spain in Eurovision

Appearances: 56
Debut: 1961
Victory: 2
- 1968: *La La La* by Massiel, with 29 points
- 1969: *Vivo Cantando* by Salome, with 18 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Auto-qualify (Big 5)

Recent History

2015: *Amanecer*, by Edurne, 21st place with 15 points
2014: *Dancing in the Rain*, by Ruth Lorenzo, 10th with 74 points
2013: *Contigo Hasta El Final*, by ESDM, 25th with 8 points
2012: *Quédate Conmigo*, by Pastora Soler, 10th with 97 points
2011: *Que Me Quiten Lo Bailao*, by Lucia Perez, 23rd with 50 points

2016 Selection

Following last year's internal selection, Spanish broadcaster TVE held a National Final, *Objetivo Eurovisión*, on February 1st. Six artists competed including Junior Eurovision 2004 champion María Isabel. The result was made up of a public televote (weighted at 40%), an in-studio jury (weighted at 30%) and a series of international juries (also weighted at 30%). Barei's 'Say Yay!' conquered the public vote and the in-house jury and came in second with the international juries, giving her the overall victory on the night.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

There's a self-assurance to this song that I really respond to, and if Barei can translate that energy onto the Globen stage Spain might really be onto something here. On the other hand, I can't quite shake off my sneaking suspicion that the build-up is a lot more impressive than the payoff, and it does take an awfully long time before the listener gets a second blast of the chorus... File under 'could go either way'.

Samantha says...

Even though this song contains not a lick of español, there's something about the positive energy of 'Say Yay!' that still feels very Spanish to me. Barei is adorable and sassy without being too brash or shocking, like that cool cousin who bought you to your first concert. If given a prime running order spot on Saturday night and if Barei's stage presence is as energizing as her preview video, this could give Spain its first Top Five placement since 1995.

Your Notes

Sweden

At a Glance

Song: If I Were Sorry
Artist: Frans
Composer: Frans Jeppsson Wall, Fredrik Andersson, Michael Saxell, Oscar Fogelström
Lyricist: Frans Jeppsson Wall, Fredrik Andersson, Michael Saxell, Oscar Fogelström
Performing: Automatic Qualifier for the Final; placement to be determined.

About the Artist

The youngest artist in this year's competition, 17-year-old Frans Jeppsson Wall is originally from the southern town of Ystad, but he now bounces back and forth between Sweden and London. At the age of seven, Frans topped the Swedish charts with the Zlatan Ibrahimović-inspired '*Who's da Man*', a collaboration with the band Elias. Two years later, he topped the charts again with the similarly-themed '*Fotbollsfest*'.

Sweden in Eurovision

Appearances: 55
Debut: 1 958
Victory: 6
- 1974: Waterloo by ABBA, with 24 points
- 1984: Diggiloo Diggiley by The Herreys, with 145 points
- 1991: Fångad av en stormvind by Carola, with 146 points
- 1999: Take Me To Your Heaven by Charlotte Nilsson, with 163 points
- 2012: Euphoria, by Loreen, with 372 points
- 2015: Heroes, by Måns Zelmerlöw, with 365 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Automatic qualifier in 2013. Qualified in 2004-2009, 2011, 2012, 2014.

Recent History

2015: Heroes, by Måns Zelmerlöw, 1st with 365 points
2014: Undo, by Sanna Nielsen, 3rd with 218 points
2013: You, by Robin Stjernberg, 14th with 62 points
2012: Euphoria, by Loreen, 1st with 372 points

2016 Selection

The highlight of many fans' Eurovision seasons, Melodifestivalen 2016 did not disappoint. Four semifinals (hosted in Gothenburg, Malmö, Norrköping, and Gävle) and a Second Chance round (hosted in Halmstad) led up to a twelve-song Final at Friends Arena in Stockholm. While Oscar Zia's '*Human*' narrowly edged out Frans's '*If I Were Sorry*' on the international jury vote, the teenager won the public vote and the right to represent his country on home soil this May.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Arguably the most on-trend entry in this year's contest, '*If I Were Sorry*' is already making waves all over Europe, which suggests Sweden are in a good position to extend their run of great results. Whether they can win or not depends on how effectively this low-key slice of Ed Sheeran pop contrasts with the more animated performances on the night. Whether or not we're in Gothenburg this time next year, expect this one to have a strong post-contest afterlife.

Samantha says...

I find it interesting that Sweden's following up a bombastic, eye-catching winner with a very low-key and straightforward song to represent them on home turf. It's undoubtedly modern, and I could imagine it playing in the background of any coffee house on the planet. I also appreciate the fact that the lyrics balance the impetuous and impulsive nature of one's first love with the maturity of knowing when to let go. I don't think it's quite enough to garner Sweden another win, but it's certainly a song to be proud of.

Your Notes

Switzerland

At a Glance

Song: Last of Our Kind
Artist: Rykka
Composer: Christina Maria Rieder, Mike James, Jeff Dawson, Warne Livesey
Lyricist: Christina Maria Rieder, Mike James, Jeff Dawson, Warne Livesey
Performing: 3rd in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Born in Vancouver (but with Swiss lineage), Rykka (born Christina Maria Rieder) started out as a busker on Granville Island, and hasn't stopped exploring since. She released three albums under her own name, and released her first as Rykka, Kodiak, in 2012. Her next album, Beatitudes, is expected out later this year.

Switzerland in Eurovision

Appearances: 57
Debut: 1956
Victory: 2
- 1956: Refrain, by Lys Assia
- 1988: Ne partez pas sans moi, by Celine Dion, with 137 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified 2005, 2006, 2011, 2014

Recent History

2015: Time to Shine by Mélanie René, 17th in the semi with 14 points
2014: Hunter of Stars, by Sebalter, 13th with 64 points
2013: You and Me, by Takasa, 13th in the semi with 41 points
2012: Unbreakable, by Sinplus, 11th in the semi with 45 points

2016 Selection

Switzerland's Eurovision selection was as complex as ever, catering to the various linguistic groups in the country:

German-language broadcaster SRF, along with Romansh network RTR, set up an online platform for artists to submit their songs to. Ten songs were submitted to the pan-Swiss Expert check, with three songs remaining afterwards: *'Half a Smile'* by Vincent Gross, *'Feel the Love'* by Stanley Miller, and *'Last of Our Kind'* by Rykka.

French-language channel RTS solicited submissions from the public, with six songs proceeding to the Expert Check. *'Another World'* by Bella C and *'Disque d'Or'* by Kaceo were chosen for the next stage of competition.

Italian-language broadcaster RSI also accepted submissions, eventually selecting three for the Expert check. *'Because of You'* by Theo was the eventual choice of the Italo-Swiss.

The Swiss National Final, Die Entscheidungsshow, was held on February 13th in Kreuzlingen. Following a televote and the say of a jury, Rykka's *'Last of Our Kind'* was named the winner.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

In terms of the production, '*The Last of Our Kind*' comes off like CHVRCHΞS covering the theme from an 80s John Hughes movie, a concept that could have been brilliant, but unfortunately falls rather flat in the execution thanks to a meandering chorus and a vocal performance from Rykka that comes off more whiny than rousing, even in studio form. At this point, Switzerland are Eurovision's most consistently mediocre competitors.

Samantha says...

The Swiss have done well with Canucks in the past, but I don't think that Rykka's quite worthy of mantle borne by Celine Dion and Annie Cotton. In studio, '*The Last of Our Kind*' felt almost anthemic, but live on the national final, it simply felt anemic. The composition doesn't feel like it builds to a major climax, and I can't quite tell if the song's trying to be atmospheric and ethereal or bold and inspirational. I want so much more from this song, and it's just not quite delivering it.

Your Notes

The Netherlands

At a Glance

Song: Slow Down
Artist: Douwe Bob
Composer: Douwe Bob, Jan Peter Hoekstra, Jeroen Overman, Matthijs van Duijvenbode
Lyricist: Douwe Bob, Jan Peter Hoekstra, Jeroen Overman, Matthijs van Duijvenbode
Performing: 6th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Inspired by the country and folk sounds of the 1960s and 1970s, Douwe Bob Posthuma was the winner of the 2012 Dutch series De beste singer-songwriter van Nederland. Since then, he's released two full-length albums (with a third, Fool Bar, to be released just prior to Eurovision), toured extensively throughout the European festival circuit, and collaborated with artists like Anouk.

The Netherlands in Eurovision

Appearances: 57
Debut: 1956
Victory: 4
- 1957: Net als toen by Corry Brokken, with 31 points
- 1959: Een beetje by Teddy Scholten, with 21 points
- 1969: De troubadour by Lenny Kuhr, with 18 points
- 1975: Ding-A-Dong by Teach-In, with 152 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2004, 2013-2014

Recent History

2015: Walk Along, by Trijntje Oosterhuis, 14th in the semi with 33 points
2014: Calm After the Storm, by The Common Linnets, 2nd with 238 points
2013: Birds, by Anouk, 9th with 114 points
2012: You and Me, by Joan Franka, 15th in the semi with 35 points

2016 Selection

Following the same pattern as the past three years, Dutch broadcaster AVROTROS reached for an internal selection for Stockholm. Douwe Bob was one of the first acts to be announced for 2016, with his participation confirmed by the network on September 22nd of 2015. His song, 'Slow Down', was released on March 4th.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Is Amsterdam the Nashville of Northern Europe? You'd certainly think so considering the Dutch penchant for country-fried Eurovision entries. Fortunately 'Slow Down' stops short of attempting to channel the Common Linnets and has a laid back charm all of its own. As long as they keep him away from harem pants, Native American headdresses, and inexplicable veils, this could go far...

Samantha says...

There's something so comforting and timeless about 'Slow Down'. It doesn't feel quite current, but not in the sense of being dated. It feels more like something I would hear on a "classic rock" station next to The Eagles and Fleetwood Mac. That's in no way a bad thing...while so many people think Eurovision is all about sequins and heels, there's something to be said about a song that feels like a comfy pair of jeans. Too subtle for some, maybe, but for me, I've found another artist to follow.

Your Notes

Ukraine

At a Glance

Song: 1944
Artist: Jamala
Composer: Jamala, Art Antonyan
Lyricist: Jamala, Art Antonyan
Performing: 14th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Born in what is now Kyrgyzstan and raised in Crimea, Susana Jamaladynova (who goes by Jamala) has been performing since childhood. A trained opera singer, Jamala delved into the world of jazz and soul music as her career progressed. In 2009, she won the New Wave Festival in Jūrmala, Latvia, and in 2011 was a finalist at the Ukrainian National Selection for Eurovision with the song 'Smile'. She's released four studio albums (including Podykh last year), a live album, and starred in the 2014 Ukrainian film "The Guide".

Ukraine in Eurovision

Appearances: 13
Debut: 2003
Victory: 1
- 2004
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified 2004-2014. Did not participate in 2015.

Recent History

2015: -
2014: Tick-Tock, by Mariya Yaremchuk, 6th with 113 points
2013: Gravity, by Zlata Ognevich, 3rd with 214 points
2012: Be My Guest, by Gaitana, 15th with 65 points

2016 Selection

Ukraine's National Final for 2016 was a three-part event, with two semifinals being held on February 6th and 13th, with the final following on the 21st. In each semifinal, nine acts competed for only three spots in the final, with the result being chosen by the Ukrainian public and a three-member jury made up of producer Konstantin Meladze, Eurovision 2004 winner Ruslana, and Andrei Danylko (better known by Eurofans as Verka Serdutchka). During the final, while the juries favored well-known rock band The Hardkiss, it was Jamala's sway with the public televote that sealed her victory.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

It's a pleasure to have Ukraine back in the competition after their absence in 2015, and there's a lot to admire about Jamala's haunting tribute to the displaced Tartar communities of Crimea. Personally though, I find the lack of any appreciable rhyme scheme in the verses really jarring, and while I can understand that it might be a creative choice, it has an alienating effect that casts a shadow over the whole song. A shame, because elements of this are really beautiful, but as a whole piece it just doesn't sit right with me.

Samantha says...

I have a feeling that '1944' will divide opinion much like 'Suus' did for Rona Nishliu back in 2012; some will be moved by it while others will think it sounds like two cats fighting in a burlap sack. Jamala's a powerhouse vocalist with a deeply personal story to tell, blending modern global sounds and Tatar tradition. No matter what her eventual score is in Stockholm, she's coming out of this with one of the biggest stories of the Eurovision year and the satisfaction of knowing that she's sharing a little-known facet of history with the world.

Your Notes

United Kingdom

At a Glance

Song: You're Not Alone
Artist: Joe & Jake
Composer: Matt Schwartz, Justin J. Benson, Siva Kaneswaran
Lyricist: Matt Schwartz, Justin J. Benson, Siva Kaneswaran
Performing: Automatic Qualifier for the Final; placement to be determined.

About the Artists

Joe Woolford and Jake Shakeshaft first met as contestants on the fourth series of The Voice UK back in 2015. While Jake (playing on Team will.i.am) was eliminated in the Knockout Rounds, Joe (on Team Rita Ora) progressed to the second week of live performances. Behind the scenes, they became fast friends and began to collaborate. Joe is from Ruthin, North Wales, while Jake is from Stoke-on-Trent.

United Kingdom in Eurovision

Appearances: 59
Debut: 1957
Victory: 5
- 1967: Puppet on a String by Sandie Shaw, with 47 points
- 1969: Boom Bang a Bang by Lulu, with 18 points
- 1976: Save Your Kisses For Me by Brotherhood of Man, with 164 points
- 1981: Making Your Mind Up by Bucks Fizz, with 136 points
- 1997: Love Shine a Light by Katrina and The Waves, with 227 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Auto-qualify (Big 5)

Recent History

2015: Still in Love With You, by Electro Velvet, 24th with 5 points
2014: Children of the Universe, by Molly, 17th with 40 points
2013: Believe in Me, by Bonnie Tyler, 19th with 23 points
2012: Love Will Set You Free, by Engelbert Humperdinck, 25th with 12 points

2016 Selection

For the first time since 2010, the United Kingdom held a National Final to determine their nation's singer. "Eurovision: You Decide" was broadcast on February 27th. Six songs, many of which had been vetted by members of the UK's chapter of the OGAE, were presented and voted upon by the British public.

ESC Insight Thoughts

John says...

Even the title of '*Eurovision: You Decide!*' felt like a tacit admission that the BBC had well and truly run out of ideas this February. So it is that history repeats itself once again and we lurch from Jemini to James Fox territory with this instantly forgettable number that even the Danes would reject for being too middle of the road. There's nothing actively embarrassing here, just a wearily familiar feeling that we could, and should, be doing so much better.

Samantha says...

It's great that the BBC are finally letting the people have some sort of say in their country's Eurovision entrant (although leaving a sizable portion of the selection to the OGAE crowd is a can-of-worms question that is best discussed in another forum). '*You're Not Alone*' certainly isn't a bad song; it has the uplifting nature that people often like to see in their Eurovision songs, and Joe and Jake are inoffensively charming. However, the whole package is somewhat vanilla, like a discount-shop Coldplay...or something from Denmark.

Your Notes

